Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE Gaiden

Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

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Dear Mom, Dad, and Also (Sigh) Little Sister,

I, Kanou Shinichi, am living in another world no longer connected to present-day Japan by an interdimensional wormhole. Well, technically, it's our own very far future. Anyway, it's called the Holy Eldant Empire, and I'm living my best life here. Not that I thought you were worried about me, necessarily, but I figured I should mention that.

Hikaru-san and Minori-san, my friends who stayed here with me, are doing well too. It would be great if you could let Hikaru-san's family know. Minori-san says she doesn't have any family, but she must have friends, and Matoba-san or her colleagues in the JSDF might be worried about her, so if possible, maybe you could get word to them that she's throwing herself into life here. (Frankly, harder than she needs to.)

There's one other bit of news I thought you might be interested in.

I got married. Me!

NO, she's not two-dimensional. She's a fully 3D, living, breathing woman. It would take forever to give you the entire story, but that's what it comes down to. Theresa says that we're still a long way and a lot of problems from being able to open a stable large-scale hyperspace tunnel, so I'm not sure if this letter will reach you. I want you to know, though, that we're trying to find a way to come home for a visit. Sending you this little update is actually part of one of our experiments. I mean, it would be boring just to send pebbles through as a test, right?

I hope you'll wait for me.

But don't hold your breath.

Kanou Shinichi

Chapter One: Marrying Her Majesty

I was in an audience chamber in Holy Eldant Castle, the seat of government of the Holy Eldant Empire. The castle had several audience chambers where one might meet Her Majesty, but I, Kanou Shinichi, had been shown into the biggest of them all.

It felt like a while since I'd been in here. This was where I'd been brought the very first time I'd come to the castle. That gave it a warm glow of familiarity, and made it seem like an oddly appropriate place to make my formal report to the empress about the conclusion of the kerfuffle with Japan.

Maybe this time I'll manage not to say something that gets me punched in the face, I thought. Granted, it had mostly been my fault.

"...And so, things are going according to the original plan, which means we've resolved the biggest, er, problem or question or whatever you'd like to call it," I said, addressing the young woman who sat on the throne and the advisors who stood on either side of her. "The short version is, everything's great. All's well that ends well, I guess?"

We had taken control of the hyperspace tunnel in order to drive the American army out of this world—out of this time. I was here to give my personal report on events. Considering we'd leaned on the Eldant army to lend us soldiers and even the magical transforming dragon robots called Faldras, it seemed like a high priority to let them know what had gone on. Communication is the essence of good business!

Gosh, listen to me. I sounded just like the general manager I was. Then again, since relations with Japan had been forcibly severed and Amutech now existed in name only, I was technically out of a job. Wait... What was I going to do about that?!

As I was busy worrying about things that it was definitely much too late to be worrying about, a voice of wonderment came from the throne. "Most interesting. So everything is 'great,' is it?"

"Huh? Er, uh, yes? I mean, yes!"

"All's well, all's ended well?"

"I think... I mean... I think?"

I was definitely getting a funny vibe here—and then I finally looked up at the Imperial Majesty sitting on the throne. Her build was willowy, with slim arms and legs, and skin as smooth and pale as ceramic. Her long hair was a rich silver, while her eyes were as green as gemstones. She

completely deserved the description “just like a doll,” at least when you were using it positively. I didn’t know anyone else it would fit better. She almost didn’t seem real sometimes—like you wanted to ask, does she really breathe? Does she really go to the toilet?

She was Petralka an Eldant III, and while her appearance might immediately make you think “pretty little princess,” she was actually the ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire, its absolute monarch, and also the person who had punched me right here in this audience chamber. When even my own father never hit me! (Okay, that’s a lie.)

“Ahh. All according to plan, everything is great, everything has ended well. Very, very interesting.”

I felt like I was standing in my own personal bubble of ominous chill. Was I imagining that?

I said: “.....Um.....?”

I glanced at the silver-haired guy standing to the right of Petralka’s throne with what I hoped was a look that asked, *What’s going on here?* But he only shook his head and looked pained. Okay, so... Wait. What was this? What was happening? Why were people looking at me like I was a condemned prisoner?!

Garius en Cordobal was a relative of Petralka’s—her cousin, as I recalled—and a knight who stood at the top of the nation’s military hierarchy. As you might expect of someone who shared Petralka’s bloodline, his beauty was beyond reproach (even if it did leave you screaming about the unfairness of the world). Why was even *he* acting strange?!

“In that case, we have a question for you, Shinichi,” Petralka said, leaning forward ever so slightly. “Was it also *according to plan* that at the very moment you had driven back the American troops, you asked Myusel to marry you?”

“Hrk...?!” That left me lost for words. H-How did she know about that?!

Myusel Fourant was the maid at my mansion and the first person I’d met when I’d arrived in this other world. She was also a super-duper adorable half-elf and, uh, just like Petralka said, the girl I had asked to marry me.

She’d said yes, by the way. If you’re wondering. Yay! I mean, it’s not like someone as kind and sweet as Myusel would turn me down “because you’re an otaku” or anything! With this, I’ve finally overcome the trauma of

that devastating day, and now I can start living a new life of—no, no, no, stop. Not the point.

"How did you know?" I blurted out.

Without a word, Garius raised one arm to about shoulder height. There was a flapping of wings and a bizarre creature, sort of like an owl, but with no head and a single eye lodged in the center of its body, settled onto his arm. I knew what that thing was. A kind of sprite, a magical creature that the Eldant army used for observation and surveillance. They'd been posted around our mansion once, back before Petralka and the others trusted us. .....But that meant...

"Y-Y-You saw everything?!"

Garius nodded, still silent. For that matter, so did all the important advisors gathered in the audience chamber.

Petralka jumped up from her throne like a marionette when someone pulls on the strings. "Shinichi." She strode down off the dais, straight toward me.

Uh-oh. I was getting a sense of déjà vu. The last time she'd done this, it had been followed by a punch to the—

"Shinichi!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am?!" I exclaimed, involuntarily straightening up.

At the same moment, a hand covered by a long white glove reached out —and grabbed me by the collar. "How dare you, after all this, commit adultery!"

Adultery? But...

"Uh? Wait..." I forced myself to look Petralka in the face despite my intense anxiety at that moment. Her large, green eyes were brimming. I could even see the tears beading at the corners, as if to say *I'm going to cry any minute!* In fact, I think she *was* crying, which...ahhhhh?!

Garius finally spoke. "Shinichi," he said with a sigh. "Her Majesty was of the belief that returning to Ja-pan would be most conducive to your happiness. Therefore, despite the heartbreak it caused her, she resolved to let you go."

"Oh... See, I was busy getting stuff ready, and... You know..."

"She knew that if she went to see you off she would want to stop you from leaving, so she forced herself to stay behind. And you trampled on this kindness and consideration."

“Huh? No, but—”

“And as if that were not enough, you even chose that time and place to ask Myusel Fourant to marry you!” He seemed to be saying that was as bad as openly ridiculing the empress. “I presume you can understand why Her Majesty might be upset.”

“Shinichi!” Petralka shouted again, her hands still on my neck. “Myusel is not the only one! Do you have any idea how much *we* love you, Shinichi?!”

“Uh...” Getting hit with a straight, no-holds-barred confession of love from a gorgeous young woman left me scrambling for words.

To be completely honest, I knew that Petralka was in love with me—but she was the empress of an entire nation. The absolute ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire, the most important person around. Someone like her couldn’t go marrying whoever she felt like. Me and her, get married? I knew it just wasn’t possible, and I’d thought she did too.

I’d seen Petralka cry plenty of times before and, let’s be honest, it was usually my fault. But she was normally so strong-willed and imperious that it was *intensely* moe to see her weep like a normal girl. Er, I mean, I suffered a serious attack of guilt.

Okay, first things first. I knew I’d better apologize. After all, putting aside all the stuff about her status and everything, I really did like her a lot. In fact, she and Myusel were still neck and neck in my mind.

If Myusel had been the first person to accept me in this new world, Petralka had been the first to openly acknowledge me. And this beautiful, young, young, *young* (okay, no, stop) tsundere empress had just told me she loved me, no preamble and no qualifications. I couldn’t *not* be moved. I felt so emotional, in fact, that I wanted to sweep her up in a great big hug, never mind that there was an imperial court’s worth of VIPs watching.

I’d already asked Myusel to marry me, though—if I went hugging the empress, now *that* would be adultery. Argh, but Petralka was crying! What was I supposed to do?

“Hey, I... I’m s—” I started.

“That’s it!” she exclaimed, wiping away her tears and suddenly grinning, her smile almost ferocious. “Let us hold a matrimonial ceremony immediately! Right now!”

“What? I mean... *What?*”

Ma-tri-mon-ial. Matrimony. In other words...a wedding? Like, *right* now? Were we going to have a wedding right out of the blue like that? I must have looked particularly confused, because Petralka, still grinning as if she had everything under control, said, “Don’t worry! No one can object, for we are the Empress!”

Well, yes, I knew that! But there was knowing it and there was—like, could an absolute monarch really do that?! Weddings weren’t normally something you just did on the spot. And hold on, didn’t she need me to agree or anything? Oh... She didn’t? Okay then. I guess being an absolute ruler really *did* mean being able to completely ignore what anyone else wants and do your own thing.

“Advisors! We will be marrying Shinichi!” Petralka announced to the audience chamber.

A number of her councilors looked troubled. Someone exclaimed, “Y-Your Majesty?! This is altogether too much...” Petralka acted as if she hadn’t heard them. Normally, Prime Minister Zahar would have been the first to try to stop her, but he was recovering from serious injuries and wasn’t present. And Garius, for some reason, didn’t seem inclined to object.

“Ah, a marriage! A proclamation must be sent out to the populace! Our neighboring nations must be informed! All must be made ready for the ceremony! Quickly, now! With dispatch! Make haste!” Petralka commanded. The adorable empress still hadn’t let go of my collar.

My name is Kanou Shinichi. I’m a hard-core, thoroughbred otaku who was appointed General Manager of the General Entertainment Company Amutech, which promotes friendship and cultural exchange between Japan and the Holy Eldant Empire, a nation in another world.

Or anyway...it did. And I was. But now the hyperspace tunnel that connected Japan to this other world—properly speaking, the very far future—had been closed. We ourselves had decided to seal up the “hole” connecting the two, on the grounds that no matter how many thousands of years might separate them, having a permanent connection between the past and the future seemed dangerous.

That choice had a few ramifications. It meant me and a handful of other

Japanese people who hailed from the modern era were left in this other world. It meant we no longer had the backing of the Japanese government. And it meant being cut off from the flood of anime, games, manga, novels, and the rest of the pop cultural bounty of contemporary Japan.

Amutech, which had been created specifically to import otaku goods to this other world, lost any reason to exist, which of course meant its general manager (me, as you might recall) was out of work. And so I found myself in my second bloom of NEET-hood, as unemployed as I had been before I arrived here. (Though I wasn't at risk of slipping back into shut-in-ism at this point.)

Just as I was wondering what I would do with myself from here on out, I was suddenly confronted with a completely unexpected prospect for lifetime employment—as the empress's husband.

Wait... Is that a job?

"And that's the story," I said with a sigh. "I just don't know what I'm going to do. I mean, I'm happy that Petralka wants to marry me, I really am. I felt like I could have broken out into one of those Russian kicking dances right on the spot. I mean, think of all the titles she has! Tsundere, royal-sounding loli, *really* young, silver-haired, empress... To hear someone like that say they love you to your face, I mean, who could just say no?"

Okay, so to be fair, I had a pretty wide "strike zone." I could go for anything from nubile young beauties to the comically well-endowed older-sister types.

"I really do owe her a lot, and deep down she's got a completely sweet personality, and if I were playing a game and there was a Petralka route and a Myusel route, I would totally save at the branch and then spend the next three days fretting about which one to go through..."

The reason I hadn't chosen Petralka, as it were, had nothing to do with any kind of personal shortcoming of hers. It was because I simply assumed I could never marry an empress. Even I, a former shut-in otaku who knew virtually nothing about how the world worked, understood that there would be a lot of people with serious objections to a match like that.

"So now..... Sigh." I rested my head against the wall and sighed

again.

Who was I explaining all this to? I'd like to know the answer to that question, myself. I could deliver all the exposition I wanted, but the blank white wall was never going to answer me. I was just trying to hear it out loud, hoping to get my thoughts together in the face of a mounting wave of nightmarish possibilities that kept going through my head.

I was the only one in the room at that moment. The room was in Eldant Castle, and it seemed to be what amounted to a guest chamber. A very elegant place; fancy furnishings and fixings everywhere. Like one of those VIP suites at a hotel, not that I had ever stayed in a place like that. There was a bed, so you could stay the night, along with an *en suite* bath and toilet adjacent to the next room over. (They were separate, of course! This was no "unit bath.") It was really the height of luxury, except for one thing: I couldn't leave.

"Argh... *Now* they imprison me? Or, wait, is this technically house arrest?"

That's right. I was stuck in this room.

It had been two days since Petralka had declared she was going to marry me. Absolute ruler or no, you couldn't just go "Cool, done" when dealing with the wedding of a person of such high rank and importance. Sure, you might be able to throw enough money and weight around to do a physical ceremony posthaste, but letting the citizens know what was happening, informing other countries, and that sort of thing wasn't the work of a moment. So they'd tossed me in here while they were getting things ready so that I couldn't run away before the wedding.

Petralka's ladies-in-waiting brought me food and cleaned the room and everything, so life was pretty cushy as far as it went—but I also had plenty of free time on my hands to imagine all the most terrible things my mind could come up with.

"Myusel... Are you worried about me?"

As a point of note, I'd gone to give my report alone, while Hikaru-san, Minori-san, Myusel, and Elvia had all gone straight home. There was a chance they didn't know yet about my marriage to Petralka, or my house arrest. Myusel was probably worried about me. Minori-san would probably at least be thinking that something was strange. As for Hikaru-san and Elvia... I didn't know. They seemed to have their own stuff going on, stuff it

wasn't really my business to get involved in.

"Myusel! I'm so sorry for putting you through this anguish!" I said.

"Er, please, Shinichi-sama, it's quite all right," responded a voice like a chiming bell—a voice I never tired of hearing, a voice that almost sounded like Mimorin herself. Ahh! My spiraling anxiety had finally caused me to start hearing voices..... Wait.

"Myusel?!" I spun around to find Myusel in the doorway, her big, purple eyes blinking at me. Her long, flaxen hair was tied into twintails, as usual, and she was wearing a maid uniform, also typical for her. Such a cute, adorable maid-san! No, hold on. What with us being engaged now, I should be thinking of her as bride-san! *Bride-san!* Oh! The twin twinges of joy and bashfulness that word brought me! "B-But what are you doing here?"

"I'm not sure what you mean..." Confused, Myusel set down the furoshiki-wrapped bundle she was carrying. Wait—why did she have a furoshiki-wrapped bundle?! And in the classic furoshiki vine pattern, no less! Who'd given her that?! "A messenger came from the castle and told me you were staying here. I was instructed to bring you a change of clothes and anything else you'd be needing."

"This messenger... They went to you personally, Myusel?"

"Yes, sir. I'm told the orders came directly from Her Majesty."

Petralka had told her that? What *was* that girl thinking?

"I brought you three days' worth of clothes, plus your portable game system, some manga, and a few light novels."

"I love a girl with good sense!"

For sheer time-killing ability, nothing beat video games and light novels. Manga were easy to read, but you could burn through one in half an hour, so when your inventory space was limited, novels were better; they'd last you longer. Then again, of course, with Myusel here, I didn't have to worry about killing time. I was pretty confident I could spend the entire day just chatting about everything and nothing with her.

"Shinichi-sama, I must ask... What in the world is going on?" Myusel said.

"Well, Petralka kind of suddenly blurted out that she was going to marry me..."

"Yes, that's what I heard." Myusel's expression darkened.

No, Myusel, please don't look so bleak!

“When... When you asked me to b-be your b-b-bride, Shinichi-sama... Well, I was so taken by the moment that I...I didn’t even consider Her Majesty when I...agreed...”

Myusel knew that Petralka was in love with me too. The two of them got along really well. They had one of those friendships that transcended social status and race, with just one little wrinkle... Me. And I felt really bad about that, I totally did—there just wasn’t much I could do.

“That’s really my fault,” I said. “I don’t blame you or Petralka for this. If I’m stuck in this room now, I pretty much brought it on myself. I have to admit, though, I’m not sure what Petralka’s thinking anymore.”

“You mean Her Majesty?” Myusel cocked her head. It made one of her pointy ears, the sign of her elvish heritage, peek out through her hair. It was another of those things that made her so moe, all the more so because she didn’t seem to think too much about it herself. Me, I could look at that ear all day just getting moe-er and moe-er... But I guess we’d better set that aside for now.

“I was just thinking, sure, I asked you to marry me, but all I’ve got is your agreement.” I coughed discreetly. “We haven’t, you know, had a wedding or any kind of proper ceremony yet.”

“Oh, y-yes, that’s true.” Myusel flushed and looked at the ground.

“I thought maybe Petralka was hoping to pry us apart while we still just had an engagement and marry me herself. But if that’s her plan, why would she tell you to bring me stuff right when she had us separated? If you and I were to escape together right now, her whole plan would be for nothing.” Not that I thought it would be all that easy to escape.

“Perhaps...Her Majesty trusts that we would never betray her like that?”

“No, nope, definitely not,” I said, shaking my head. “As far as Petralka’s concerned, I’ve already betrayed her. She said asking you to marry me was adultery!”

“Oh...” Myusel put her hands to her mouth. It was one of those intensely moe things that she (etc., etc.).

“So I’m pretty sure there’s not a lot of trust there. At least not toward me. I mean, that’s why I’m under house arrest, isn’t it? Then again, that’s me—maybe she trusts you, Myusel.”

“Do you...really think so?” Myusel’s brow furrowed in thought. “If you’re right, then what is Her Majesty thinking?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

I knew Petralka was smart—a very fast thinker, quick on her feet. She could be stubborn and pushy, sure, but when she made a decision she could act on it immediately and with conviction. She wasn’t on the throne just because of her bloodline. In my experience, she didn’t do a lot of flat-out irrational things. It was always possible that her choice to imprison and marry me had been driven by out-of-control emotions that had deprived her of her normal decision-making abilities, but again, if this was mostly an emotional thing, she would never have let me and Myusel see each other. Yet if she accepted our union, then why keep me locked up?

“Speaking of smart...”

Why hadn’t Garius objected to Petralka’s snap decision? He was as quick-witted as she was, and at least as accepting. When Petralka really got carried away, it was always either Garius or Prime Minister Zahar who brought her back to reality—and the prime minister was currently recovering from serious injuries he’d sustained during the whole thing with the American army, so only Garius had been there. Yet he hadn’t stopped Petralka. Why?

For that matter, why had Petralka burst out about marrying me right in front of a plenary session of her court, with all kinds of important people and all their bodyguards present? I guess it *was* a quick way to get the word out if she really wanted to hold the ceremony right away, but at the same time, putting feelers out to people individually seemed more likely to avoid ugly arguments in the long run. Petralka and Garius *must* have known that...

“Hrm,” I grumbled.

“I just don’t understand,” said Myusel. We were an engaged couple seeing each other for the first time in two days, yet all we could do was shake our heads and ponder.

Okay, let’s jump forward another half day.

“What’s *this* all about?” I said to myself as I took in the elaborate meal laid out before me.

I didn’t eat as a hobby, by which I mean I wasn’t very particular about exactly how my food tasted. I was no gourmand. Sure, I was now

accustomed to the delicious meals Myusel made for me, but it wasn't like I refused to eat anything else. I'd enjoyed the regular shipments of junk food and snacks we'd gotten from Japan, and unlike a certain potter, I wasn't inclined to shout "I wanna talk to the manager!" any time a dish was even slightly less than perfect. Suffice to say I had a Goldilocks palate: not too sensitive and not too dull, perfect for happy eating.

But even I could tell that the meal in front of me was the ultimate in luxury. Piles upon piles of the heartiest food...is exactly what there wasn't. Instead, the fish, meat, vegetables, and everything else were carved and sculpted so delicately you wanted to ask, "Hey, is this a figure?" and they were plated so thoughtfully that you wanted to ask, "Hey, is this a diorama?" The chef had treated each plate like a canvas, and each dish looked like a painting. Even the way they drizzled the sauce over things looked significant. I had a strong suspicion the ingredients were *take-this-and-this-and-one-of-these!* barrages of the finest stuff. I didn't know if they had truffles or foie gras or shark fin in this world, but if they did, they were using them here.

I guess this was what you would call a meal fit for a king—or an empress. From that perspective, maybe the meal wasn't unnatural or out of place. Maybe it was exactly what I should have expected. Not least because each side of the table (which was long enough to have a pretty good RC-car drag race) was lined with dignitaries from the Holy Eldant Empire. Frankly, I'd barely known there were so many VIPs in the whole nation. There were probably fifty people there. And they didn't even seem to include any of the local leaders.

In short, every servant of the Eldant court and every castle honcho was present for a feast that would make my engagement to the empress officially...official. And for the past several moments, every single one of their eyes had been on me. This was some pressure! The gazes, they hurt! They were physically painful!

I guess to them, I'm still just some no one from nowhere. If I was one of them, and heard that some kid had shown up and was suddenly going to be Her Majesty's husband, I'd want to get a good look at him too. Not that I enjoyed being the one who was being gotten a good look at. *They probably think I used some sort of underhanded trick to get in good with Petralka.*

Important members of the court these people might have been, but none

of them were at Eldant Castle 24/7. Some of them probably didn't know that Petralka and I were friends and had been for a long time now. The announcement would have come as a surprise to them—they probably thought Petralka had lost it.

To them, I must look a lot like Rasputin or Dokyo or the fake eunuchs of China, I thought. There was no shortage of historical examples of shady men who got close to powerful women in hopes of gaining power themselves. Those men tended to end up exiled at best, if not imprisoned or just outright assassinated. Which seemed like bad news for me. I mean, it was definitely bad news. Like, should-I-have-gone-back-to-Japan-instead level bad news!

Most of the people at the table with me ranged from "older dude" to "total geezer," but there were a handful of young men and women around. Which I guess wasn't surprising—the vagaries of inheritance and succession could throw up a young ruler or courtier from time to time. Heck, the empress herself was only in her teens.

I even spotted a couple elves and dwarves. Specifically, Rydel Guld and Eric Slayson, the fathers of Romilda and Loek, two of my students at school. For the most part, rulership in the Holy Eldant Empire was consolidated among the humans, with so-called "demi-humans" on a lower social level, but the Guld and Slayson families had both played important roles in establishing the country, and were treated accordingly despite the fact that one was a family of dwarves and the other of elves.

As I sat there in awkward silence, first Rydel and then Eric met my eyes, each giving me a smile and a polite nod. It was definitely a relief to have some familiar, friendly faces among the crowd, but that only got me so far.

Myusel... My eyes darted to a corner of the room, where I could see Myusel among the serving women. She was watching me, looking as anxious as I felt. She must have picked up on the atmosphere in the room. But that was all she could do. She'd at least been permitted to be near me, but only as a server, as a lady-in-waiting. I guess that wasn't particularly cruel or unusual, or even unexpected, since she was technically, officially, a maid who had been hired by the Eldant state.

"Your Majesty," one of the courtiers said, and instantly I felt a nervous tension grip the room. "I must beg you to reconsider."

"Reconsider what, Duke Salmis?" Petralka replied. She was in good

spirits—for the moment.

"I feel obliged to point out that a marriage to this man would be a union far, far below your station, Your Majesty. It would be an outrage!" As he said "this man," Duke Salmis pointed at—that's right—me.

The table broke into a hubbub. Powerful, important courtier or no, referring to Her Imperial Majesty's personal decision as "an outrage" might very well invite serious punishment right then and there, as I'm sure Duke Salmis realized. Either he felt he couldn't stay quiet despite the risk, or something led him to calculate that there would be no reprisal. I didn't know which it was just from watching him, but given how the other courtiers reacted after his pronouncement, I guessed it was the latter.

As the chatter died away, no fewer than ten other VIPs raised their hands and voiced their objections to Petralka's choice of marriage partner. (Me, in case you had forgotten.) I assumed Duke Salmis had known there were others in the room who were scandalized by the situation, and that was why he'd been willing to criticize Petralka openly. Even an absolute monarch would find it difficult to ignore discontent from too many of her powerful followers.

Each of the courtiers put it in a slightly different way, but all their objections boiled down to: Kanou Shinichi is much too socially inferior for Petralka. As the apex and virtual embodiment of the system of social class, if the empress were to besmirch her own position so badly, how could she ever keep the commoners in line again?

I had to admit, there was a certain logic to what they were saying. Petralka, however, narrowed her eyes and replied, "Hoh. So it would be an outrage, would it, if we were to marry Shinichi?"

The table went quiet, cowed—but only for a second. The courtiers collectively decided to focus instead on the man sitting beside Petralka, across from me. "Minister Cordobal!" they said. "Surely it should fall to you even more than us to remonstrate with Her Majesty! Are you not the empress's right hand, next in line for the succession?!"

"Indeed I am, and make no mistake, I know it," Garius said calmly. "However, Her Majesty's mind is made up. And in any case, I believe the lot of you are slightly missing the point."

"You dare?"

"Shinichi is not the commoner, the ordinary person, you keep describing

him as. He possesses a domain, however modest, adjoining our capital, Marinos. That and the many times he has been of service to our nation should make it more than conscionable to accept him as nobility among us."

"Um... Does that mean...?" I said. This was definitely the first I was hearing of any of this.

It was Petralka who informed me, "Half of that mansion and the school belong to you, Shinichi. They were always split between our empire and the Ja-panese government, but now there are only three people in this nation connected with your country. As you rank highest among them, those possessions belong to you, do they not?"

It was true that I'd outranked Hikaru-san on the Amutech org chart, and Minori-san was technically our bodyguard, so she wouldn't be considered more important than we were. But still...

"It was you who discovered the Kingdom of Bahairam's new weapon and averted a needless war with them, to say nothing of a world-ending catastrophe. You've raised the level of education in our nation, particularly for children of the nobility, and have made every effort to strengthen our land. That is not even to mention your services importing otaku culture and its attendant goods, which have even begun to find a warm reception among neighboring nations. You have produced a great deal of advantage and profit for us, Shinichi. It cannot be considered strange that you might be given a title of nobility."

Petralka laid out the details so readily and so fluently that she sounded as if she'd memorized the lines in advance. And yes, it was true, I had done all those things, but I'd never thought to myself, *Hey, I'm gonna do all these awesome things!*

"O-Okay, granted," I said, "but forcing something like that through—"

"From the days of its first ruler, the Holy Eldant Empire has ever had a fine tradition of raising up the most civilized among us, if you will, regardless of status or origin," Rydel-san said jovially, sipping some wine. "Shinichi-dono—or perhaps I should say Shinichi-sama—one cannot even bat an eye at your admission to the ranks of nobility."

"I agree entirely," said—you've probably guessed—Eric-san, who was also holding a glass of wine. They'd once lived up to the traditional enmity between elves and dwarves, but not anymore. "Besides, we're increasingly seeing marital unions that couldn't have been dreamt of not so long ago. I

for one welcome these reforms to what's considered civilized!" He grinned and raised his glass in what seemed to be a toast to Rydel-san. They looked like two people who had been friends for decades, not members of races that had conventionally been at each other's throats.

.....*Wait, wait, hold on.* "Marital unions that couldn't have been dreamt of not so long ago"? Could that mean—?

"Why, you!" exclaimed Duke Salmis, the one who'd started this entire debate. He was glowering at Eric-san and Rydel-san, but they acted like they didn't even see him.

Things were getting uncomfortable. Only ten or so of the people at the meal had expressed open disagreement with Petralka's marriage announcement, but there was a good chance that at least half the people here agreed with them and just weren't saying so out loud. In fact, if we weren't lucky—or careful—it could very well be that Petralka, Garius, and Eric-san and Rydel-san would be the only ones here who remotely approved of this idea. Which is to say, of me. A lot of the detractors, though, weren't willing to contradict the empress to her face and risk earning her wrath, hence the small showing when Duke Salmis objected.

"We cannot pretend not to understand your reservations," Petralka said, leveling a chilly gaze at the assembled party. "Which is precisely why we have been careful to make this formal and correct. Think of your own families. Were they all nobility from time immemorial? It is perfectly normal for noble status to be conferred upon one who did not have it before. The system exists, as do the proper laws. And for a nobleman to be joined to the Imperial family in marriage is nothing strange. Or do you disagree? We assure you, we are not simply trying to see what we can get away with."

The dissenting advisors scowled but didn't say anything. What did Petralka make of their silence? Whatever it was, she gave the attendees of the dinner a long, hard look.

When she spoke again, she sounded more regal than before. "We wish to assure you that we are not doing this merely to spite all of you. Indeed, we are convinced that we are only empress thanks to your support, and that this empire only exists because of you. That is why we have convened this banquet: to make this request of you. Please support our union. As we have said, there is much to do, from the awarding of Shinichi's honors to preparations for the ceremony to the production of garments suitable to the

occasion. The entire nation shall celebrate. Please, we ask you, lend us your aid."

Then Petralka rose and bowed to her advisors.

"Majesty..." Garius, startled, leaned toward her and gave her a concerned look. The other VIPs were all trading glances. They had probably never seen Petralka, that is to say Empress Eldant III, behave toward them with such deference.

"Er... Uh," I said. Realizing I couldn't just sit there looking confused, I scrambled to my feet and joined Petralka in bowing. "Please help us!" I said.

A murmur built slowly among the attendees. All I could do was stand there with my head down and listen to it, feeling despondent, keenly aware of Myusel's eyes on me from the edge of the room.

"Aahhhh..." The sigh seemed so long and so heavy that it made me depressed, even though I was the one sighing it. The bathtub that had been prepared for me was as luxurious as they came, but when I thought about what had happened at the dinner and everything that the future held, how could I not be upset?

Marrying Petralka—the thought itself didn't bother me. In fact, if you took Myusel out of the equation (if that was, you know, okay), the idea put a real spring in my step. I'd be thrilled.

An empress and a commoner, though? That seemed like a big ask. I was sure Petralka and Garius both knew that, yet neither of them seemed the least bit bothered by it as they pressed ahead with Petralka's and my union.

"Her advisors must think she's gone crazy," I said to myself and sighed again. The bathing area attached to my "guestroom" seemed too big to be an *en suite* bath, but it was.

If you were wondering about Myusel, she was cleaning up from the banquet with the other ladies-in-waiting. Not that she would have, like, jumped right in with me if she were here. *You're engaged!* you might think. *Who cares if you hop in the tub together?* But at the moment, it wasn't clear whether Myusel and I would actually be able to get married or not. Not to mention, this castle was like Petralka's house, and I didn't have the nerve to

get up to any of that 18-and-over stuff with Myusel right here. Besides, if Petralka happened to find out, she might beat me half to death—heck, all the way to death.

"I hope I get a chance to sit down and have a real talk with Petralka and Garius before I get swept straight into a wedding," I said. I couldn't believe the words coming out of my own mouth.

At that moment, someone said, "Excuse me."

"Huh?!" I exclaimed. The door to the bath opened and someone came in.

I went stiff right there in the tub, and as the figure drew closer, I could see through the steam that it was a young woman. One not wearing a single shred of clothing. What I'm saying is, she was buck naked.

"Hrk?!" Without even meaning to, I did a 180° spin in the tub so my back was to her. Except then I heard her say:

"Of course, I'll be more than happy to wash your back." She sounded disengaged. I'd caught only the most fleeting glimpse of her face, but I knew it was someone I'd never met before. She had golden hair and blue eyes and was really awfully darn pretty, but that only made me more sure I would have remembered her if I'd seen her before.

I squinched my eyes shut and said, "N-No, it's fine! You don't have to do that! Maybe you could just leave me by myself...?"

She gave no sign of leaving. "But then I wouldn't be able to perform my duty..."

"Y-Your duty?"

"Yes... To serve you..."

"S-S-Serve me?"

"Yes... Serve you..."

That sounded awfully, uh, euphemistic.

The young woman's voice was faint, but I caught the slightest tremor of embarrassment in it. So here we were in the bath and she was naked and she was talking about service and stuff, and, and, could she mean, you know, it being nighttime, all that *ecchi* stuff—like, in other words... No! It was okay, I was sure it was. If Petralka had sent her, then I was sure she must only and without any ulterior motives want to wash my back, so it was fine! *Just calm down! Don't get any weird ideas, my son!*

"You may call me Lumilie, Shinichi-sama." There was a *splish*.

Something—or someone—had gotten into the water.

"L-Lumilie-san? Okay, well, I don't need any service, but thanks!"

"But Shinichi-sama, it's my duty..."

"I get it! You're, uh, you're worried that you'll get in trouble if you don't do your job. Y-You can just *say* you served me! I won't tell anyone!"

"I'm afraid that won't do..." I felt something touch my back. Two somethings, actually. They were soft, and very rouuuuwwhaaaa?!

Stay strong! Stay super strong, O my rational mind!!! I know what this is—it's a test! Petralka was testing me to see if I could endure temptation, and if I were to just be like "Don't mind if I do! ♪" then the next thing I knew my head would be on a pike!

Ahhhhhhhhh but the very brief glimpse I'd caught of Lumilie's chest was combining with the feeling on my back to torment my reason, to torture it into submission! And then she was taking advantage of the fact that I'd frozen solid to wrap her arms around my shoulders...

Her pale fingers brushed teasingly, mischievously across my chest... My chest... They tickled... Wait, how was this washing my back?!

"Please... Let me fulfill my duty," she breathed breathily, right in my ear, in a moaning sort of whisper. She sounded like she could barely hold herself back and it was so, so erotic—no! Argh! No further!

"N-No, don't—"

"Shinichi-sama..." Lumilie's fingers slowly worked their way down to my stomach, and then...f-farther down than that... What was this? What was going on here? It was bad, that's what this was! It was bad and I felt bad for her, but I was going to have to force her away... Huh?

"My..."

My body! I couldn't summon any strength. What was this? Betrayed by my own body?!

Bad bad bad bad very very bad! At this rate—at this rate, my first time wasn't going to go to Myusel *or* Petralka, but this girl Lumilie whom I'd just met... No! There was having no scruples, and there was having *no* scruples, you know what I mean?!

"Don't—" I started again. My voice was practically a whimper now, and Lumilie interrupted me.

"Please... Have mercy on me..."

I could feel the water swirl, and then Lumilie's fingers were sliding

toward my galaxy, my crisis, my very sensitive area and ahhh ahhhh ahhhhhhhhhh?!

"Shinichi-sama..." Lumilie whispered my name, but all I could do was helplessly tell myself *no, no, no!*

It was a week since I had been placed under house arrest at Eldant Castle, and I gathered that preparations for my marriage to Petralka had been proceeding apace. For my part, I just went along with things and didn't fight, to the point that now they occasionally allowed me to take little walks through the castle halls. It wasn't like that was going to get me any closer to escaping—and even if I broke out, where was I going to go? My mansion? They would find me in a second. Besides, Myusel was here at the castle. She wasn't with me all the time, but she was definitely expected to keep an eye on me.

"Siiiigh," I sighed. I'd driven off the American army and had pictured myself returning to a hero's welcome. Let's just say I hadn't expected the turn events had taken. I'm sure the whole situation wouldn't have been nearly as fraught if Petralka weren't the empress, but then again, if she weren't the empress, we probably never would have met.

Man, Petralka really is just the cutest.

I didn't have any, you know, fantasies about little sisters—I had one in real life, after all, which made it pretty hard to get moe about them. But I was definitely moe about Petralka, and it was a different sort of thing from the way I felt about Myusel. It was to the point that I'd had some pretty lewd dreams starring the empress.

"Oops!" My "son" was getting a little too excited, so I tried to calm him down by reciting a totally not even remotely erotic litany in my head: *ATM-09-ST, ATM-09-RSC, ATM-09-STC, ATM-09-SSC, ATM-09-GC, ATM-09-WR, ATM-09-DD... Oh yeah. What was the light-class custom that showed up in* Big Battle*?*

I contemplated a mental image of what might have been a metal octopus or sea monster or something—it was impossible to say. But it had the desired effect. My son obediently lay back down. Phew. Now I could finally finish my business.

At the moment, I wasn't in the toilet attached to my room, but in a stall in one of the bathrooms located around the castle. Not that using the bathroom in my room was any trouble, but since I could walk around the castle now, using a different toilet was a nice excuse for a change of scenery.

".....Oh." I thought I heard footsteps, and that was when I realized someone had gone into the stall next to mine. Well, it was a public bathroom. That sort of thing happened. What I definitely didn't expect was for the person in the next stall to speak to me. Especially not for them to say, "Shinichi Kanou-dono."

"Myyahhh?!" I exclaimed.

"Please, stay right where you are," the voice said quietly. I didn't recognize it, but that wasn't so surprising. Even this uppermost floor of the castle was pretty well-populated, not just with nobles and royals but with soldiers and knights and whoever else. There was no way I could know all of them personally. "After all, it would hurt *you* more than anyone if this were to get out," the voice continued.

"Uh?" I didn't know what they were talking about.

"How do you like being with Lumilie?"

I caught my breath and felt my heart start racing. This person—could he possibly know—?

"She reports that she takes *good* care of you. Is it true that you two are intimate in the bath nearly every day? Ahh, it's good to be young!"

"W-Well—"

"Everyone has their place in life to consider, though. For someone soon to become Her Majesty's husband to take a castle serving girl as a lover... The empress is still young. Imagine how she would feel if she heard about it."

The voice sounded almost physically oozy, like the speaker knew he had me right where he wanted me. It was pretty clear at this point that this guy was behind Lumilie's offers to "wash my back."

"Now, please don't get the wrong idea. We very much want you to go through with your marriage to Her Majesty."

"I'm sorry?"

"This is an excellent opportunity for us, and we'd like to be on good terms with you. Yes, good terms. Since you will, after all, be Her Majesty's

husband."

There was definitely, you know, something going on behind what he was saying. "What are you telling me to do?" I asked.

"Us? Nothing," the other person said calmly—but I could hear the smile in his voice as he continued, "We trust you will, spontaneously and of your own accord, work to further our interests."

So that had been their game all along. This guy and his friends hoped to use me to put pressure on Petralka, which would give them virtual control of the empire. I guess they figured it would be easier to make me dance to their tune than to try to force Petralka directly to do anything. When they saw that Petralka lo— well, she liked—well, she *felt that way* about me enough to try to force through this crazy wedding, they knew that if I asked her for something she was likely to give it to me, even if I was asking a lot.

"Can I assume you're some of the people who were at the banquet the other night?" I asked.

That earned me only silence from the other stall.

It was an obvious guess. If these people thought they could use me to influence national politics, they must already have some political clout. No commoner or person on the street, with no say in policy at all, would even think of a plot like this. Who would benefit from having Her Majesty's husband "spontaneously" working on their behalf? They had to be councilors or people on that level.

"I'm also guessing that you're not the ones who spoke out against what Petralka was doing. You must have been some of the people who stayed quiet. Am I right?"

"Don't forget your place. It's practically a miracle that Her Majesty even took notice of some outlander from who knows where." The guy sounded a little annoyed now. Apparently he wasn't going to answer my question. "With all ties to Ja-pan severed, you and your position now hang on Her Majesty's whim. Do you know what would happen if you lost the empress's august affection—say, because she learned that you'd been secretly canoodling with another woman? Perhaps you'd like to find out?" he sneered.

He was right. I knew perfectly well that Petralka could put me down for the count with a snap of her fingers, if she felt like it. Of course, I'd known from the start that if she got angry it could be off with my head, Japanese

backing or no.

“I hear you,” I said. “You’re right, I don’t want to stake my life on it... I think.” I sighed.

“We’re so pleased you understand.”

“So, what exactly should I...you know...?”

“That will come another time. The walls have eyes in this castle, and I dare not speak long.” No wonder he’d waited until I left my chambers. The bathroom wasn’t entirely safe either, though—if we both went in and didn’t come out for a long time, it would naturally raise suspicions. “Until next time,” the voice said, and then I heard footsteps trotting away.

With that conversation weighing on me, I discovered nothing would come out. To think—unable to relax and do my business right in the bathroom!

“I should’ve known this would happen,” I mumbled, sighing again.

Marriage. Such a simple word. Actually doing it, though? Not so easy.

In modern Japan, all you needed to do was submit a declaration of marriage to your city hall and boom, you were married. More and more couples were doing it that way. But here in this fantasy(-ish) world it didn’t work like that, especially not if you were someone of high status. There were formalities to consider, ceremonies, a whole mountain of stuff to work through.

“We’ll have the ceremony in the castle garden.”

“Yes, but where shall the delegation from Zwelberich be seated?”

“What do we do about the seating order at the wedding banquet?”

“Will there be a parade through town on the day?”

And on and on. There was no end to the questions, queries, and consultations. The marriage of Her Majesty the Empress was the sort of thing the entire country would celebrate. It obviously couldn’t be contained within the castle walls.

There were a whole lot of issues to resolve. Like the route for the parade through town (which as far as I was concerned was as good as humiliation play), and how to handle security for it, and at what point the dignitaries from other countries should enter the castle, and how commoner spectators

should be handled... There was the banquet seating, the outfits for the ceremony—all the rigmarole that normally accompanies a wedding, multiplied by questions of diplomacy and public safety.

I found it all going over my head pretty much right away, but Petralka, along with Garius, diligently went over one thing after another with the assembled advisors. Petralka looked thrilled to be working out each detail. She was genuinely happy to be getting married to me, and that gave me a warm glow too.

The happier I felt, though, the more the conversation with Bathroom Guy weighed on me. It must have shown on my face, because Petralka stopped in the middle of a conversation with one of her councilors and said, "What is the matter? You seem less than pleased."

"Oh! Uh, uh, do I?" I quickly tried to make myself smile. "I'm just here, smilin' away!"

"Are you, at this late moment, finding that you do not wish to marry us?"

I shook my head vigorously. "That's no problem at all. Nuh-uh!"

"Then perhaps a twinge of conscience," Garius suggested.

"C-Conscience?" I said.

"For example, here on the cusp of your marriage to Her Majesty, you find yourself developing feelings for some other woman..."

Petralka looked furious. "What?! Shinichi, you little—"

"Nope! Uh-uh! No! Not at all the case!" I exclaimed, waving my hands as if I could shoo away the whole idea. "How could I? I mean, I lovingly love your loveliness, Petralka! L-O-V-E from the bottom of my heart! That's true love! Trembling, pulsating love! At this moment, I am a true love warrior!" I clenched my fist, nearly bursting with the passion of my own explanation!

Not that any grim reapers were going to go running in a line across a desolate wasteland or anything! (Meaning unknown.)

"A-Are you indeed?" Petralka said, blinking. She seemed a little taken aback.

"I am! I love you, Petralka! I've loved you for twelve thousand years!"

"Er?"

"That's right—way more than eight thousand! And I'll still love you a hundred million and two thousand more years from now!"

“We cannot understand a word you’re saying.”

“What I mean is that you and I together—uhh, well, I’m running out of songs here. But my point is, I can’t *stop* loving you! It’s 24/7/365 nonstop LOVE, baby!!!”

“V-Very well, we take your point. Just please stop shouting,” the empress said. She fixed her eyes on the ground and turned red very suddenly for some reason. Wow, cute much?! What was with this totally obvious, totally cliché blush?! Was she that embarrassed? Was she?!

Come to think of it, was this the first time I’d actually, clearly, personally said “I love you” to Petralka?! Wait... Had I just made my first confession of love?! No wonder she was so...

I f-feel like I’m gonna choke!

Seeing Petralka as bashful as she was happy made my heart prickle with guilt. I guess with so many people here, this was hardly the time or place for an “Uh, actually, by the way...”

Maybe it was partially on me for saying the word “love” so many times.

Hey, is it just me, or...

I was desperately trying to backpedal just a little bit, but on the edge of my vision I saw it. Among the counselors conferring with each other, smiling and giving their blessings to my and Petralka’s marriage, several people shared a brief but significant look.

So let’s just say a lot was happening. But it was then that, for the first time in two weeks, I was granted permission to go back home. Not, like, *home* home; I mean back to my mansion. When he told me, Garius joked that my relentless professions of love in the audience chamber must have worked. Anyway, the official reason was that I’d behaved myself while under house arrest.

Thus I found myself in my own living room for the first time in weeks, relaxing mightily. “Ahh! I can finally calm down a little.”

The idea was that there were some preparations I might need to make that I could only do here at home, so I was supposed to get ready and then come back to the castle. But I decided to start by letting two weeks’ worth of tension melt away. Getting ready for the wedding could come after that.

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel came in with tea, smiling. She’d been away almost as long as I had, but no sooner had we gotten back than she’d set about making tea for me. What a fine lass. Truly, a lovely li’l girl. Oops. The happiness seemed to have me turning Osakan.

“Hey, where are Hikaru-san and Elvia?”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen them,” Myusel said, cocking her head.

If you were curious, Minori-san left the house at almost the same time we showed up. Something about being called away by “Minister Cordobal.” I guess he was eager to swap BL mags again. Nice to know some things never changed.

Except that meant...

“It’s, uh, just the two of us, huh?”

“Wha? Oh, er, y-yes, so it is.” Myusel nodded awkwardly, like a broken doll.

I guess it might have seemed a little late to be feeling awkward about that, but in the castle we’d known there either was or probably was a guard on the other side of every door, so we didn’t, you know, get up to anything. But this house was different. This was *my* castle, so to speak. Which meant...

“Myusel...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Could you step out for a minute, please?” I said, pulling out my phone and looking at the screen. Minori-san had equipped the grounds of the mansion with a variety of security cameras and warning devices, and after the wormhole closed, she’d put the application to control them on my phone as well, so if we got any unwanted visitors, I would know right away.

“What?” Myusel blinked, rooted to the spot. I just nodded. She understood and trotted quickly out of the room.

Someone else appeared in her place: Lumilie. The same young woman who’d tried to entrap me in the bath. “Shinichi-sama?” she said.

I smiled and said, “I’ve been waiting for you.”

But we were immediately interrupted by someone else who emerged from behind her, saying, “I’m sorry, but maybe you could save the *tender moments* for later.”

I sighed and said the only thing I could: “Welcome to my mansion. Are

you alone?”

The newcomer was a small man with plenty of facial hair. I guess you could say he was getting old, for there were streaks of white in his hair. He wore a completely unremarkable, ash-colored cloak. That must have been to avoid attracting attention when he went out, because I was pretty sure that when I’d seen him at the meeting about the wedding preparations, he’d been dressed in something louder.

That’s right. I didn’t know his name, but I recognized him as one of the Eldant Empire’s prominent councilors. His was the voice that had spoken to me in the bathroom that day.

“Yes, I’m alone, but I come on behalf of all. It would be far too conspicuous if we were to travel as a group.”

“I have to admit, I didn’t expect you to come yourself.”

“The fewer people involved in such machinations, the better. Less chance that they’ll be exposed.”

“Makes sense.” I assumed he at least had a bodyguard or two with him, but they didn’t have to know why their master was here.

The fact was simple: this guy didn’t trust anyone. That’s why he wanted leverage over people to make them do what he said. Like with Lumilie here: she’d told me herself that he was essentially holding her family hostage so that she had no choice but to use her body to seduce me at his command. I knew he’d had to scramble to set up this “honey trap” because Petralka’s marriage announcement had been so sudden, and I realized the seductress herself might be completely expendable in his eyes. It would be better for him to get fresh pawns the next time he needed them for something. Yuck.

“Now then, Shinichi-dono. As to the substance of our wishes.” The old man gave me a smile with a distinct mocking edge. “First, as a sign of favor on the occasion of the Imperial wedding, we think you should request that Her Majesty grant pardon to certain prisoners.”

“What prisoners? How many of them?” I said.

It was true, you heard plenty of stories about certain kinds of criminals being granted amnesty—in other words, being released and their offenses forgiven—when nobles got married.

“Which prisoners... Sadly, their leaders have already been executed and are beyond restoration, but several of their number remain in jail. I believe

you would recognize them as Bedouna. The Assembly of Patriots."

"Oh..."

So that was what he had in mind. You know, I'd always wondered how they'd found out that Petralka would be visiting our school when she did. Had this guy been feeding them information?

Even if he had been, I didn't think he was impulsive enough to imagine that if the empress was assassinated, he would somehow take her place. Garius was next in line for the succession, which would have passed immediately to him, not this old dude. He'd probably hoped that he would be able to use Garius's failure to protect the empress to level charges of ineptitude against him. And that led me to another conclusion...

"Wouldn't it be easier for you just to make up a reason to have the rest of them executed?" I asked.

"We would of course be perfectly happy with that outcome, but it lacks something in the way of plausibility." The old man laughed. The smile on his face was pleasant, but that made it all the more scary. He wasn't interested in saving his "friends" at all. He was just afraid that his "pawns," who had failed in their mission, would eventually be traced back to him, and he was looking for the best way to get rid of them. Having them out of prison would be the quickest solution.

This guy just kept getting grosser and grosser. In fact, he was practically through the other side of grossness into some weird kind of purity.

"I see..." I said.

"We look forward to you making good on this *first* request," he said, sounding downright...friendly.

"If I do this... If I get these prisoners freed... Y-You'll really keep quiet to Petralka about me cheating on her with Lumilie?"

"Of course we will, I promise. Keeping that secret is the key to our 'negotiations.' Just make sure you hold up your end of the bargain," he replied, smiling again.

At which point I said:

"But I refuse."

I gave it my best superpowered-manga-artist-close-up spin.

"What?!"

"One of Kanou Shinichi's favorite things is saying NO to people who think they're important!" I declared to the flabbergasted old man. I figured

that would do the trick. When I saw him visibly turning red with anger, I said, “All right, come on in.”

BUT I REFUSE.
DOOOOM!

The guy almost choked. He turned around, disbelieving, and exclaimed, “Y-Your Majesty?!” Petralka was standing there with her arms crossed. Garius was right behind her, as were Minori-san and Myusel. “I-Impossible! My guards—”

“Your guards are taking a little nap,” Petralka said with a nasty smile.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself, Duke Belgand?” Garius said. “At this point, I imagine it can’t be much.” So the old guy’s name was Duke Belgand. Not that it mattered.

“N-No, Your... Your Majesty! This man, he... He—!” The duke pointed at me. “He betrayed you, Your Majesty! I know for a fact he was having secret assignations with one of his ladies!”

Ahh. So if he went down, he figured he would at least take me with him. Hey, I couldn’t fault the impulse, but...

“By ‘one of his ladies,’ do you mean that doll?” Petralka asked.

“What?” Duke Belgand said. He took a fresh look at Lumilie—who simply went *fwip!* and popped her head off her body as easily as I would take off my hat. “She... She’s a puppet?!” The speed with which he figured that out implied the duke was aware of the puppet we’d developed to serve as a body double for Petralka. I guess that made sense.

Incidentally, we’d hurriedly converted the prototype Petralka body double to create the doll version of Lumilie. It was controlled by the dwarf Lauron. The real Lumilie wasn’t a super expressive person, so Lauron didn’t have to learn too many facial or bodily nuances for the impersonation. Thankfully.

“But... But when? When did you make the switch? I’m certain Lumilie is a real person...”

“The first time you attempted to entrap Shinichi,” Petralka said. “We detained Lumilie Marlen immediately, and spent that entire night producing the puppet duplicate. We already had the craftsdwarves of the Guld Workshop stationed at the castle.”

“B-B-But... But then... But...” The Duke looked from me to Petralka and back, incredulous that we had seen through his entire plan from the start.

“Your whole approach was mistaken,” Petralka said.

“Wha?”

“To send a woman to Shinichi with his lucky-*sukebe*-protag personality, hoping to blackmail him into doing what you wish—you were wrong to

imagine that it was even possible! Did you think such a cliché plot could ever work on the likes of *him*?”

She pointed right at me.

Let’s wind back the clock about ten days, to when Lumilie first cornered me in the bath.

“No... You mustn’t!” I cried like a damsel in distress.

For the second time that night, the door flew open with no warning. Petralka pounded in, demanding, “Shinichi! How is the water temperature?!”

She was followed quickly by Myusel. “Shinichi-sama, I— I tried to stop her, but she—”

Lumilie was every bit as startled as I was. With a lot of splashing she pitched forward from behind me, her pale, bounteous chest squishing right into my face and making it feel very good but also very hard to breathe and oh no my little man was in a state way beyond anything I could make any excuses for! If the other two saw me like this...

“I s-swear this isn’t what it looks like, Myusel! Petralka! I didn’t do it! I didn’t do anything! I’m pure! I... I...” I said, desperately hoping to explain away the two big, soft meat buns pressed directly against my cheeks. Not that I imagine my explanation was very convincing under the circumstances.

Petralka and Myusel were both dead silent, maybe from sheer shock. After what seemed like a very long time, I heard Petralka sigh and say, “Why are we not surprised?” I couldn’t see very well, what with Lumilie on top of me, but it didn’t seem like Myusel was panicking either.

Huh?

“Shinichi!”

“Erp! Yes, ma’am?” Petralka’s voice carried a piercing chill that made me figuratively sit up and be on my best behavior. She was scary...

“It seems you are as lucky a *sukebe* as ever.”

“It does, doesn’t it...” Myusel said. Even she was agreeing!

“Oh, uh, I mean, maybe? If you say so,” I said. I didn’t think I had been, like, enjoying it that much. Okay, maybe I had. When had Petralka and

Myusel picked up the expression “lucky sukebe,” anyway? Well, whatever—it meant she understood that this situation really was “lucky.” (Read: a total accident.)

“We cannot complain. That is the man with whom we fell in love,” Petralka said. “But know this: lucky sukebe-ing is the only kind of sukebe-ing we will allow. Get away from her before this turns into an 18+ doujinshi!”

“Erp! Yes, ma’am.” I nodded, but I couldn’t seem to muster the strength.

“You there, girl. At this moment we may yet forgive your actions, but if you try to go further than this, rest assured we will not look the other way. It would be tantamount to mocking the empress. We could well justify imprisoning and executing your entire family.”

“N-No... Please, I b-beg your forgiveness,” Lumilie said, but she didn’t get off me either.

“It is simple to earn. Let go of him!” Petralka said.

“I... I can’t,” Lumilie said, shifting.

Ack! Her chest... Her chest!

“In the bath... Drugs...”

“Drugs, you say?”

“Something that...saps the strength...”

Oh. So that explains it. It wasn’t a rush of blood to my head that left me unable to move; there was some sort of muscle relaxant in the water. I guess it made sense—if they wanted me in a compromising position whether or not I wanted the same thing, they couldn’t have me running away on them. They’d probably figured that since Lumilie got in the bath only after me, she could establish the compromising situation before the drugs affected her too badly. Still, the fact that they had been so desperate that they’d go that far to entrap me...

“Very well. Myusel, help us. We are going to pull them off each other.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Myusel said. They waded into the tub. They were both fully clothed, but neither of them seemed to care.

“No, uh, wait! Now’s not the time!” I said.

“And when do you suggest *would* be the appropriate time to pry you apart?” Petralka demanded.

“B-But with her chest... My little man’s galaxy is—” If they got Lumilie off me right now, Myusel and Petralka would see just how energetic Mini-

Me had become. “If you saw me right now... Well, you can’t! No one would ever take me as their husband!”

“You are going to be *our* husband, as we have said! That is the end of it!” She went right to work.

Unlike when Lumilie had shown up, it was the drugs that kept my tongue from working this time. “Ruh-roooooh!” My inarticulate howl echoed around the bathing area.

“Unbelievable!” Count Belgand said again, looking at the Lumilie doll, which was still holding its head in its hands. “Then, all those reports she gave me... They were all from—?”

“Yes. It was this puppet reporting to you,” Petralka said, smirking. “Lumilie Marlen is safely at the castle and has told us everything. Including how you all but held her family hostage and ordered her to seduce Shinichi. You are a monster.”

Count Belgand bit his lip. The comment seemed to sting.

“Given how sudden Her Majesty’s announcement of the engagement was, I’m sure you had to scramble to find a suitable pawn,” Garius said. “As such, you wouldn’t use someone you’d invested extensive time and effort into training. You would use your position to force somebody to do your dirty work with the intention of eliminating them later. A classic stratagem, I admit. The fewer people involved in a plot, the less likely it is to get out. This is more Elder Zahar’s field, though...”

In other words, they’d seen straight through Count Belgand.

“And yet that is precisely why you didn’t notice we had replaced Lumilie Marlen,” Petralka said.

“If it was someone you’d known better, you might have,” Garius said. That was one of the first things we’d gotten out of Lumilie after she was taken into custody. She and Count Belgand didn’t know each other especially well, which meant it would be simple for Lauron to fool him with her impersonation.

“Now, Count Belgand, you’re going to tell us the names of your friends. We assume you didn’t come up with this brilliant idea all on your own.”

“You... You believe I’d tell you?”

“We very much do.” Petralka smiled. “We are the Empress, after all. With royal permission, one can do nearly anything in this country.”

Such as torture a man until he begs to die.

The reason we’d waited so long to confront Count Belgand after apprehending Lumilie, and the reason we’d waited for him to come to my home, was precisely because we’d hoped he would admit to everything himself. Naturally, every word he’d said here had been captured by the tiny recording devices Minori-san and I had set up around the house. They hadn’t missed a detail. If Lumilie’s testimony wasn’t enough to prove Count Belgand’s activities—effectively, plotting rebellion against Petralka and her regime—they now had it in his own words.

For better or for worse, the Holy Eldant Empire was an absolute monarchy. Her Majesty’s word was law. If she said something was all right, then it was all right—up to and including torture. And in this case, there was no chance it would be inflicted on the wrong person.

“J-Just... Leave my wife and child out of this, please... They had nothing to do with it,” Count Belgand groaned. Even a guy who would take someone else’s family hostage and order a girl to go screw around with a guy she didn’t even know still cherished his own family. I guess that at least showed that he had something more than the naked desire for power. He wasn’t one of those embodiment-of-evil types that showed up all the time in manga and novels and stuff. Naturally enough, I guess.

“Please... My family...” he said.

“An excellent subject for discussion at the castle,” Garius said. He raised a hand. A troop of soldiers rushed into the room and took Count Belgand into custody.

So, let’s sum up. Petralka and Garius guessed that by acting like they were going to force through a wedding, they would be able to make the anti-Petralka faction in the Eldant Empire show their hand.

“It is clear enough that although we may be the empress and absolute ruler, not everyone is necessarily loyal to us,” Petralka was saying.

Duke Belgand had been taken away, and we were all in my living room —Petralka and Garius on the one hand, with the crew formerly known as

the employees of Amutech (me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san, along with Myusel, Elvia, and Brooke) on the other. We were doing an impromptu debrief on recent events. (Cerise wasn't there because she was off with the kids. The talk was complicated and not especially pleasant, so we figured it was best if Brooke and Cerise's babies didn't hear it.)

"However, among direct retainers of Her Majesty, any wavering loyalty is a clear and present danger," Garius said, taking an elegant sip of the tea Myusel had made for us. "Hence the empress and I decided that this would be an excellent opportunity to smoke out anyone who was questioning their commitment to Her Majesty. You made excellent bait, Shinichi."

"I can't believe you would do that to me," I groaned, but the truth was I was happy that I had been able to be of help to Petralka. Not to mention it was a rush to catch the guy behind a seduction/blackmail attempt.

Elvia cocked her head and looked at us. "So does this mean you're not really gettin' married to Shinichi-sama, Your Majesty? It was all an act?"

"Sure," I said. "It was just—"

"An act? Whatever do you mean?" Petralka interrupted.

Uh.

I spun toward her. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she said evenly, "This was simply a way to kill two birds with one stone. Three birds, even!"

"Wait... Petralka?!"

"Keeping him at the castle would protect him from anyone who got any rash ideas, such as assassinating him in order to prevent the marriage. And Myusel joined him there to help see to his safety," she said.

"We then returned them both to this mansion precisely because it's less heavily guarded than the castle. We knew that made it more likely that the ringleader of the seduction attempt, or at least one of his direct subordinates, would show themselves," Garius said. He glanced at Elvia. "We also, Elvia Harneiman, wanted to keep an eye on your whereabouts."

"Y-Ya mean '*your*' like *mine*?!"

Evidently that came as a shock to her, but Garius continued very seriously: "While we acknowledge all that has happened, it remains that you hail from Bahairam, and that you still have close ties to members of their military, including Amatena and Clara."

"R...Right," Elvia said. I could understand why she might be taken

aback. True, she was still involved with Amatena and her subordinate Clara, importing manga into Bahairam, but that was because I'd told her to do it. It had to feel unfair to her for that to be turned into an accusation. The fact that Garius was willing to tell Elvia all this to her face was a pretty good sign that he and Petralka didn't seriously suspect her of anything. She hadn't done anything they hadn't expected, and this appeared to be what amounted to an innocent verdict.

I still had a question, though. "Um, Petralka?"

"What is it, Shinichi?"

"So the whole thing about you and me getting married..."

"Ah! Worry not. The wedding will proceed." She nodded firmly, brimming with confidence. "The neighboring nations have already been informed of the ceremony."

"Er— But— That's not what I—"

"We would be a laughingstock if we now told them not to come. No, we shall do no such thing. The wedding will be held as planned and you will become our husband."

Then she gave me her cheerfulest, cutest smile.

Back in my room for the first time in what felt like ages, I stared vacantly at the ceiling. So the adorable empress had really and truly meant all along to marry me. All that stuff about smoking out disloyal retainers was just a sideshow. If anything, you could almost say she'd used the smoking-out-the-rebels thing as an excuse to set up a marriage with me, rather than the other way around.

No matter how cute she was, she was still the empress. The absolute monarch.

Come to think of it, I remembered something I'd heard Garius say when he was talking to Prince Rubert of Zwelberich. He'd told the prince that members of the royal family couldn't let their personal feelings dictate their actions, even in matters of love. But that was sort of another way of saying that if a member of the royal family could make imperial business dovetail with their personal feelings, then they had every excuse to pursue them.

A splendid display. What else was there to say?

To be honest, partly because of the way she looked, I'd always thought of Petralka as sort of like a sweet little sister that I had to protect. But I'm sure that was disrespectful to her. She would never do something just because her feelings had run away with her. Or if she would, or did, she would make sure she laid the proper groundwork first. She was smart enough for that. She was, in fact, a perfectly capable adult woman already. She was...*cool*. That's what I thought. She'd made it possible for me to feel that way. Nonetheless...

"Shinichi?" Petralka poked her head through my open door.

"Oh, Petralka. You haven't gone home yet?" I'd thought for sure she was back at the castle.

"Are you telling us to leave?" She stuck her lower lip out at me. It really did make her look childlike, redoubling the sense that she was a young girl I wanted to keep safe. While I was still scrambling for how to respond, she said, "We wished to show you something before we left." Then she sort of *vwsh*ed into the room.

She was wearing a perfectly white dress. It had frills everywhere, and if you looked hard you could see embroidery all over it. It was spectacular. Despite the long train, it seemed to float and billow with her every movement. No matter how you looked at it, it was definitely...

"A wedding dress!" I said.

"Does it suit us?" Petralka asked.

"Yeah. It looks fantastic," I replied, and I meant it. It didn't even show as much skin as her normal outfit, yet it conveyed an unmistakable womanliness. Maybe it was the way the dress hugged her hips. She was the picture of a proper lady—a real bride.

"Perhaps you've now fallen for us afresh."

"Yeah... I sure have," I said, and I meant that too. "But Petralka, I—"

"There, Myusel, did you hear him?!" Petralka called triumphantly into the hallway.

"Uh," I said. I froze on the spot, my eyes wide. Myusel shuffled out from behind Petralka—but just like the empress, she was wearing what could only be a wedding dress.

On inspection, it was a bit plainer than the one Petralka was wearing, but it still looked startlingly good on her. It really brought out her cuteness—I mean, her beauty.

“Shinichi-sama,” she said, blushing and taking a nervous step into the room.

“We obtained Myusel’s measurements when we prepared the battle dress for her,” Petralka said, sounding like she felt very clever about it.

“Petralka... Does this mean...”

“You should know that for official purposes, she will be a concubine,” Petralka said, suddenly too shy to look me in the eye. “But we ack...acknowledge Myusel as... Ahem! Myusel is our f-f-friend as well as yours.”

“Wow!” I gasped.

“Your Majesty!” Myusel put her hands to her mouth, looking overwhelmed.

“The great f-fool Kanou Shinichi, with whom we have indeed fallen in love... For whatever it is worth, he speaks often of equality and universal love...” I remembered mentioning those things as fundamental tenets of my culture the first day I met Petralka. “S-So show us, Shinichi! Show us that you can love t-two wives equally!” She almost yelped the last part.

“Petralka...” I said.

In other words, for official purposes, she would be my main wife and Myusel would be a concubine, a secondary wife—but in Petralka’s mind they were both equal, and she expected me to treat them that way. She could so easily have ordered me to put her first or treated Myusel as, like, a “bonus wife,” but she didn’t. She said to practice equality.

I was the one who had brought her to where she could say that. The one who had taught her to think that way. Still, that was why... Well.

“I wish I had a machine that could measure Affinity. You know, like a Sco*ter.”

Treat two wives completely equally? The difficulty level on that was through the roof. Harem playthroughs were common in gal games, but even there, you had to be constantly balancing the level of Affinity you had with each character. It was a high-wire act, sometimes almost impossible.

“But then, I’m an otaku,” I said, smiling a little as I spoke the words I remembered from somewhere. “If anyone can do this, I can.”

“Shinichi-sama?” Myusel said.

“You know. Ball-breaker games, way-beyond-hard difficulty? I wouldn’t bother with anything less.” Then I spread my arms out toward my *o-yome-sanzu*, my two wives. “In sickness and in health, in joy and sadness, for richer or for poorer, I solemnly swear to love and respect, to comfort and help, all two of my wives, until death do us part. I don’t swear to God or the Buddha or anyone else—just to you two.”

“Shinichi...”

“Shinichi-sama...”

Petralka and Myusel both gazed at me, their eyes wide and round and brimming with tears. Ahh, now *this* was moe!

“I vow on my grandfather’s name... Er, I mean my pride as an otaku!” I said. I made a determined face that definitely wasn’t typical for me.

Myusel and Petralka threw themselves into my arms.

Chapter Two: Beauty and the Beast Girl

If I say *telling someone how you really feel*, what do you picture?

The single most stereotypical image is probably the path with cherry blossom petals flying everywhere. Maybe a quiet corner of the schoolyard, where the object of affection has been summoned by a letter. Or if the parties are a little more grown-up, maybe a back table in a pub somewhere. All those places have something in common: they're reasonably private. It can be a sensitive, even embarrassing moment for the people involved.

From that perspective, this particular confession of love was unorthodox. Unusual in its particulars. To put it bluntly, it was totally inappropriate at that time and place. For starters, there was a veritable crowd of people around. We had just booted the American military (specifically a bunch of sailors and the entire aircraft carrier *Nimitz*) and their "diplomatic envoy" back to the other side.

That left the population of the training grounds significantly smaller than it had been, but there still must have been more than a hundred people there, many of them members of the Imperial Eldant military, to say nothing of wild dragons and even some dragon-shaped mobile weaponry.

And at least half of them were looking at me. If I'd been hoping for the ideal moment in which to admit my innermost feelings to the person I cherished, this wasn't it. Forget humiliation play, this was straight-up masochism.

Thinking about it, I remembered seeing some online videos of couples who did these big public things when they proposed. But a lot of them were foreigners from other cultures, for one thing, and most of those videos were *proposals*, coming after established relationships. They weren't confessions, one person finally revealing their feelings of love for another.

Then there was the concern that public proposals like that brought special pressure with them; it was hard to say no. The other person practically had to say yes. I mean, how could a timid person turn down a proposal like that? It was as if their feelings didn't even matter. From that perspective, it was barely different from forcing yourself on someone. Personally, I hardly thought it was conducive to building a healthy relationship between the sexes. But I digress.

"Uh... Um..." My voice was shaking. This was pathetic. This kind of scrambling inarticulateness was Shinichi-san's thing, not mine.

There was an order to things. A flow. A spirit. And it meant that right

now, I was cornered. I had no option but to admit how I felt in front of all these people.

I felt eyes watching me expectantly. I definitely couldn't run away, or skate by not saying anything. It was like they were saying, *Get on with it!* They didn't have to say it out loud—I felt it. Probably the only person who didn't was the woman standing in front of me. She only looked at me with bewilderment in those big, round eyes.

She had a healthy tan, and her fluffy hair was like a wild animal's. In fact, her whole appearance, her whole taut body, made you think that if you set her loose in the mountains or the forest, she could survive on her own, no problem.

"U-Um, Elvia?" I said.

"Yeah? What's up?" She tilted her head ever so slightly, her large ears flicking out of the mound of hair. The better to hear me with, I guessed. Behind her, I could see her bushy tail flicking with curiosity.

Elvia Harneiman: a beast girl of the kind known as a werewolf. People like her were common in this world. They were the descendants of creatures that had been developed as living weapons long in the past. A fact that meant...well, nothing as far as I was concerned right now.

"U-Uh, see, uh, Elvia..."

"Whatsa matter, Hikaru-sama? Are ya hurt?" She gave me a worried look. A classic misconception. She seemed so... I don't know. Innocent? Naive? Her senses were as sharp as any wild animal's, but in matters like this she was as dense as could be. I was putting out full-throttle "please, get what I'm trying to say" energy, but she, and she alone, was not getting it. I was going to have to spell it out for her.

Even that incomparable incompetent, that bastion of buffoonery, Shinichi-san had managed to tell Myusel how he felt about her in front of all these people. I wasn't about to do any less. Besides, if I didn't get the words out, I would never live it down.

"No, nothing hurts," I said. Which wasn't strictly true—my heart was aching like nothing else. But I couldn't say that. "But, uh, well, Elvia..."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"I... You... I mean, you, Elvia... Elvia Harneiman... I love you very much!" I shouted the last several words so hard I thought I would strip my throat raw. In fact, I was seized by the bizarre thought that I was shouting so

hard that I might send my blood pressure skyrocketing and start bleeding from...well, my eyes or my mouth if I was lucky. If I, of all people, were to get a *nosebleed*, Shinichi-san would probably tease me about it for the rest of my life..... But anyway.

"Oh! Eh heh. I love ya too, Hikaru-sama!" Elvia said. There was a collective intake of breath from the assembled crowd. But Elvia—with a cheerful smile on her face and even scratching the back of her head shyly—went on, "You always stand up for me no matter how dumb I act, you always comfort me when I need someone. You're my very best friend!"

So it had come to that. I thought I might just crumple on the spot, but I somehow managed to rally myself. I had to stay strong. This was within expectations. I knew the script, and this could easily be part of it. The problem was, freeing her from her misconception was going to be even more embarrassing than having to tell her how I felt in the first place.

Trying to decide what way of explaining things would result in the least psychological damage to me, I started desperately going through simulations in my head, just like a certain warrior in a certain war. And—sorry to that certain warrior—I tried a hundred clicks, a hundred simulations, and died of embarrassment in every one. This was going to be tough.

That was when, with a *smack* sound you could almost see, a palm came crashing into the back of Elvia's head. "You big moron!" It came from none other than the JSDF soldier—or I guess I should say *former* JSDF soldier—Koganuma Minori-san.

Elvia went somersaulting for several meters, but like any self-respecting werewolf, she didn't end up crumpled in a heap, but came out of it steadily on all fours on the ground.

"Wh-What was that for, Minori-sama?!" she cried.

"Elvia! What *have* you been learning from Shinichi-kun?!" Minori-san shouted back.

"Wha?" Elvia was clearly perplexed.

"Hikaru-kun has bared his very heart and soul to you in a confession of love, and you respond with a line that could have been written by the laziest anime hack?!"

"L-Love?" Elvia asked.

"Minori-san?!" I exclaimed, rushing to stop the former rotten WAC.

“But you... I thought! I thought you were supposed to be a BL specialist!”

“Hikaru-kun,” she said, and turned to me, her eyes cast ever so slightly toward the ground. It was scary. I mean *scary*. Her glasses made it hard to see her eyes, and most of her face was in shadow, leaving her expression a mystery. She looked like a vampire or a murderer or a humanoid decisive weapon! “BL has no limits.”

“Yeah, it kind of seems that way. So what?” Given that inanimate objects—be they bullet trains or buildings or even a knife and fork—could be the stuff of BL, you really could weave those stories out of anything.

“Then we take you, Hikaru-kun, already of course a man in women’s clothing...!”

Was it just me, or did her glasses flash dramatically? Probably just me.

“...and we turn Elvia into a guy! Problem solved!”

“How much thought have you given this?!”

“The womanization of virtually anything is permissible, be it battleships or guns or castles or King Arthurs! Surely, then, there can be no objection to turning one young woman into a young guy! Think of how the horizons of the world of BL would expand!” She was clenching both her fists, such was the passion of her argument.

No! She was rotten to the core! Well, I knew that already.

“Er, but Minori-san...” This attempt at an intervention came from Amutech’s general manager, Kanou Shinichi. “...Elvia’s the big-boobed type, so if you turn her into a guy, she’d lose her *raison d’être* as a character!”

“Maybe we could pass her off as being all puffed up! Or claim that it shows how jacked she is!” Minori-san pushed up her uniformed chest as far as she could to demonstrate.

“Oh yeah... It sounds weirdly persuasive coming from you, Minori-san.”

“This is no time to be being persuaded!” I sniped. I couldn’t help myself. No! This was no time to get sucked into some stupid comedy routine.

“Um... If I may?” the half-elf maid Myusel said. She was standing by Shinichi-san and looking dismayed, glancing back and forth among all of us. “Elvia-san’s, er...run away.”

“Huh?” I said. I looked around and realized Elvia was nowhere to be seen.

“She turned bright red and then went running as fast as she could.”

Now that she mentioned it, I did see a dusty streak on the ground, like something out of a manga, leading away from the training field. If we followed it, I assumed we would find Elvia. Her reaction proved one thing. “I g-guess she finally got what you were trying to say,” Minori-san said, starting to smile.

I think I looked so dejected that the others probably figured I’d never make it out of my pit of sorrow. Elvia hadn’t rejected me outright, but she hadn’t exactly accepted my confession of love without a second thought either. I knew there was another common trope in situations like this—things got awkward and then the relationship got worse and worse.

“What I’m trying to say is.....I’m sorry?” Minori-san said, sticking her tongue out abashedly. It was oddly cute. But to be perfectly honest, at that moment, I didn’t care.

I’d had a dream, one I hadn’t asked for but had been given a glimpse of. Waking up from it was the worst feeling in the world.

It had been two days since the events on the training field. All of us Amutech members except Shinichi-san had come back to the mansion. Actually, that wasn’t quite right. Now that the connection between Japan and this world had been severed, the joint venture between the Japanese and Eldant governments known as Amutech existed only in name at best. I would have to find a different way to think of this place.

Not to mention... “Oh, that’s right. Myusel’s not here either,” I said to myself as I looked at the clock by my pillow. It was way past when Myusel would normally have come to wake me up, but today she was at the castle looking after Shinichi-san. Again. Sure, we had another maid besides Myusel—the lizardman Cerise—but she was so busy with her gaggle of children that she didn’t have time to do a lot of housework.

I glanced down at the sheets and saw a bulge. It almost seemed calculated to remind me that I was a man. I knew that it was a biological phenomenon with no relation to what you really felt, but it still seemed like a betrayal. I couldn’t hold back a sigh.

Beside my bed lay a white coffin. Inside of it was an avatar that looked

exactly like me except that it was female. Using the choker around my neck, I could occupy and control that body. But I could only do it for so long.

"It's tantalizing. It makes me wish I could become a real woman." I was talking out loud, but I wasn't really talking *to* anybody. I hauled myself out of bed and started to get ready for the morning.

"I'm so very sorry," Cerise said, bowing. With her, as usual, was Man'ya, at the head of a line of burbling children. Just looking at them made my heart lighter. Lizardman or not, growing children were always adorable, and Cerise looked very motherly caring for them. We don't normally picture reptiles caring for their young, but even some fish do it, so why not lizardmen, who looked and thought much like human beings? The way they raised their children wasn't so different from how we did it.

"Well, don't worry about it. If you can't do it, no use forcing it," I said, giving her an apologetic but large smile. Cerise still had some trouble reading human expressions, so I tried to stick to big, obvious ones.

Sitting before me was the breakfast Cerise had made. Salad, chopped fruit—well, they were okay. The bread and fried eggs were a little blackened, while the bean soup had been cooked so long that the beans had started to break up. They didn't *look* awful, but when I'd tried a mouthful of each, I'd discovered that one of them was virtually flavorless while the other was wildly oversalted. To be honest, they were completely inedible.

Cerise had tried to do what she'd seen Myusel do while cooking breakfast. But lizardmen just had different sensibilities about taste than humans did. They tasted the basic flavors a little differently than us, while their powerful jaws gave them unique ideas about what it meant for something to be *al dente*. They could crunch through animal bones the way we ate potato chips. "Deboning" was not a thing in lizardman culinary culture. So they weren't likely to cook something that humans would find palatable.

"Yes, sir. But then..."

"It's all right. I can just cook for myself while Myusel's away."

My mom and dad had both been pretty slovenly people. They got up late

in the mornings, and even in elementary school I'd gotten used to making my own breakfast before I went out for the day. I didn't have any real reason to cook with Myusel around, but truth be told, I was pretty good at it.

"I truly am sorry. If only I were more competent..."

"Look, beast people just have a different sensory experience from humans. I guess elves are close enough to us to make it work, but sometimes there are gaps you just can't overcome. That's not your fault..." I trailed off as I saw something move in the corner of my vision. When I realized it was Elvia, just coming into the dining room, I froze.

"G... G'mornin'," she said awkwardly. It was really odd, hearing her sound like that. She slunk over to the table, mumbled "Bon appétit" in the same quiet voice, then grabbed some of the fruit with her bare hands and started eating.

"Elvia-san," Cerise said, trying to warn her, but Elvia didn't so much as flinch. She hadn't heard her. Like, maybe physically the sound had reached her ears, but it hadn't gotten into her consciousness. I knew Elvia wasn't the type to go ignoring people just because she was feeling a little upset or downhearted.

"Hikaru-sama?" Cerise looked to me for help, but there was nothing I could say.

Instead I mumbled "Thanks for the meal" and then beat a hasty exit. I stole a glance at Elvia, but her eyes were fixed on the plate in front of her; she stared resolutely at the fruits and vegetables. I did, though, see her tail wag listlessly back and forth.

Dogs and cats both wag their tails, but for different reasons. That was a tip I'd picked up from, I think, Shinichi-san. Something about how the same type of wag could mean the animal was upset in the case of a dog and happy in the case of a cat. You had to be conscious of what was going on. So where did that leave werewolves?

"Beast people just have a different sensory experience from humans. Sometimes there are gaps you just can't overcome." Real nice! I thought, aghast at my own thoughtless words. I'd been trying to reassure Cerise about the quality of her work, of course, but what if Elvia had overheard me? I should have thought about that before I spoke. Out of context, it could easily have sounded like I, a human, was putting down beast people.

Combined with the leftover awkwardness from the training field and the fact that things between me and Elvia seemed to be in stasis, it could have an unexpected effect on our relationship.

"Sigh..." How had things ended up like this?

No, that wasn't a fair question. It was my mistake, from the moment I'd first imagined telling Elvia how I felt, knowing that Shinichi-san was the one she loved. He had chosen someone else, in the end, but that didn't mean Elvia's feelings were going to just, *poof!*, disappear. My approach might even have seemed like piling on in the face of her broken heart.

"Gee... When I think of it that way, it kinda makes me seem like a real cad."

Who was I to criticize Shinichi-san? I felt a mocking smile come over my face, one that I meant only for myself. I started down the hall back to my room.

I was about ten when I started drawing. Us three sisters had drawn before that, 'course we had. Just like other kids. Ya know, scratching in the dirt or using charcoal to draw on the walls of our house—and getting yelled at by our parents! But ten years old, that was the first time they handed us charcoal and sheepskin paper and told us to try to draw what we could see.

Big Sis Jiji and Big Sis Ama got tired of it real quick and put down their charcoal and paper, but me— for some reason it clicked with me. I could spend all day sitting and drawing the sky—well, the clouds in the sky, at least.

Thinking back on it, I guess our parents were teaching us lots of ways to repress our werewolf instincts long before *it* came along. Drawing pictures didn't work for my sisters, but it sure did for me, so I was the one who ended up learning how to do it.

Three sisters, and I was the odd girl out. Big Sis Jiji and Big Sis Ama were both so smart and good at so many things, but I was dumb and couldn't seem to figure out how to do anything. My sisters went into the military, like my parents, and it wasn't long before they started moving up in the world as real soldiers. I took the test to get into the army and failed a few times. When I finally did pass, I screwed up the test that was supposed

to tell you where you'd fit best in the military. I ended up being one of bunches of spies they "seeded" in enemy countries. It was all I was good for.

I tried t' apologize to my parents, tell 'em I was sorry for being a bad daughter, but to my surprise, they apologized to me instead. They were even crying. I didn't really get it then, but it turned out that us spies, we were expendable. Lots more likely to die than even the crummiest soldier. It was the worst job I could have been given.

I was happy enough about it. I just liked drawing pictures, and they told me that wherever they sent me, I just had to draw whatever I saw. What a great job! But I guess my parents didn't think their dimwitted youngest daughter was gonna make a great spy. I'm sure they assumed I would be pretty much the first one to be captured and killed.

Turns out, they weren't really wrong. Maybe about the getting killed part.

I was captured while I was busy drawing an Eldant facility Bahairam had told me to check out. I'd barely even gotten started. Nine times out of ten, I would have been killed on the spot, but—

I sighed without really realizing I was doing it. I stopped letting my pencil run over the drawing paper—not sheepskin—and sat in the grass near the mansion. I stared up at the sky. Back when I was ten, I could sit and sketch clouds from morning till night and be perfectly happy, but I just didn't have it in me anymore.

"Awww," I groaned when I looked down and saw what I'd been drawing. I'd been trying to draw clouds, but among the mess of lines that covered the page, I saw a face I knew very well. "What 'm I doin'?" I mumbled. I was about to crumple the paper up—but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

That was when a voice above me demanded, "What are you doing, wolf?" It was the lizard guy.

"Nothin' much," I said.

"Were you drawing the scenery?"

"I wish ya wouldn't look without askin'!" I hurried to cover my picture. "This is personal!"

"Is it? Well, I suppose it would be." The lizard guy, Brooke, sat down beside me. "With no more connection to Ja-pan, that's it for us at Amutech,

even if not with our master. Since you were the company's illustrator..."

"Oh yeah... I guess you're right." All that had completely slipped my mind. "Wait, does that mean they're gonna go back to wantin' to execute me as a Bahairamanian spy?!"

"I rather doubt that, at this point." Brooke shook his long, narrow head. "But if you weren't worrying about how you would support yourself from now on, what in the world could have moved you to a sigh like that?"

"Well..." I thought about the person whose face was on my paper right then. "Someone told me he loves me, see..."

I wasn't sure why I decided to open up to Brooke. Maybe I thought a lizardman could listen to me without battin' an eyelash. Because, y'know, they didn't have eyelashes. Anyway, I still wasn't real good at reading their expressions. I had better luck with my nose; I could sorta smell when they were happy or angry or whatever.

"It was Hikaru-sama..."

"Hikaru-sama? Well, he..." Brooke said, but after that he didn't say anything else.

After a moment, I sighed again and said, "He said the way he feels about me isn't like a friend, but...like how a man and a woman love each other."

"Mm," Brooke said.

"But I didn't know what to say back, so I just ran off without sayin' anything at all! Fast as I could!"

"I don't suppose that helped."

"It sure didn't." Things between me and Hikaru-sama were still awfully awkward. "I just... I don't have any idea what to do."

"I have to think Hikaru-sama is aware that your love is for our master... For Shinichi-sama. Yet he still said that to you?"

I paused for a very long moment. "Yeah."

"That...must have taken quite some courage."

"Erk," I gulped. I couldn't help but think that was criticism. "I wonder why, though."

"Why what?"

"Why *me*?"

I was in love with Shinichi-sama, just like Brooke said. But in the end, Shinichi-sama had said he was gonna marry Myusel. I mean, I'd been thinkin' for a while now that that was what was going to happen. I knew I

couldn’t get him to pick me instead of her. I mean, when Big Sis Ama had kidnapped Shinichi-sama, Myusel went charging in without a second thought, cryin’ and sayin’ she was going to rescue him. She was so wild about it that if Shinichi-sama had ended up dead, she seemed like she might just have followed him!

I couldn’t match a girl that devoted. What had I done? Only jumped on top of him when my “day” came. That wasn’t a good thing where Shinichi-sama came from. It made people not like you and think that you didn’t have any shame and that you weren’t very “cute.” I’d learned that much from the “manga” I’d seen. All that stuff made me pretty sure Shinichi-sama wasn’t going to pick me.

“And yet Hikaru-sama... He loves me?”

“What makes you say ‘and yet’?”

“It just seems too, y’know, convenient. Shinichi-sama won’t have me, but the very next second someone else says he wants me. I’m sure Hikaru-sama was just feelin’ sorry for me. Maybe he wanted to make me feel better. A Ja-panese man like him couldn’t ever really love a dumb, incompetent girl like me... Could he?”

Brooke sat silently, his tongue flicking in and out of his mouth. Finally he said, “I can’t say I know. But if someone tells you they love you out of pity, is that so awful?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, scratching my knees. “It’s just, when I think about if my ‘day’ comes, and me feelin’ like this...”

“Ah.”

“I think, what if I take Hikaru-sama at his word and end up jumpin’ on him next?” Then he wouldn’t like me either. The thought of losing Hikaru-sama too was scary enough to make me start shaking.

“It’s quite the dilemma you’ve got there,” Brooke said.

“You’re tellin’ me!” I said, and sighed yet again.

Cerise came to visit me in my room, where I was sulking by myself. She was worried about me. I guess things between me and Elvia at breakfast had been so awkward that even a lizardman could see it. I felt pathetic. I always fancied myself a bit of an actor, but I was so depressed that I didn’t

even have the wherewithal to cover for my own angst.

Anyway...

"I told Elvia how I felt about her," I said.

"How's that?" Cerise asked.

"You know. I told her I loved her. Not, like, as a friend..."

"You wish to become her mate?"

"".....I guess that's what it boils down to, yeah." I smiled a little. I was a man (however I might feel about it), and Elvia was a woman, so saying that I loved her...that definitely led toward, you know, male-female relations. Sex and stuff. It might even lead toward being partners. Husband and wife.

I was surprised to find myself talking so openly with Cerise. Maybe it was because she was a lizardman. She was so obviously *not* human that I wasn't afraid she might laugh at my ideas of romance, or for that matter get annoyed with them. At the same time, I probably hoped to get a handle on what I was feeling by talking about it. Cerise had come at just the right moment.

"I know Elvia really loves Shinichi-san, though. And he'd just asked Myusel to marry him. Elvia must have had...well, a lot of feelings about that. She ran off without actually answering me, and now things are super awkward between us. We still can't have an actual conversation."

"My goodness... Hikaru-sama, you feel that way about Elvia-san?" Cerise seemed to think about it for a moment, and finally she said, "Why?"

"Huh? You mean why do I—?" I hadn't expected that question from her, and it caught me flat-footed. Then again, it might be the perfect opportunity to try to get my thoughts in order. I said, "You know how I'm always dressing in women's clothes, right?"

"I do, sir."

"It wasn't really my choice, at first. People around me... I guess mostly my parents...they wanted me to do it. And when I did, everyone said how cute I was, how nice girls' clothes looked on me. Before I knew it, I was doing it all the time. Being an obedient child, meeting your parents' expectations—that sounds great and all, but I can't shake the feeling I let myself get swept along."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I mean I feel like I just did what was expected of me. Like I don't have

much *self* of my own. The more I get used to being what the people around me want, the less I feel like I know who *I* am. What I desire, what I want to do."

Cerise gave a noncommittal "Ah." Maybe she didn't quite follow me. I could hardly blame her.

"From my perspective, Elvia seems to shine so brightly."

"What do you mean, 'shine'?"

"She wears her heart on her sleeve." I gave another slight smile. "Whatever goes through her head shows up on her face and comes out of her mouth. She definitely has her own desires, and she goes straight for them. But even so, it's sort of like she's not confident at that last moment. Like she can't quite assert herself, or like she's too eager to accommodate other people. It makes her give things up. That's what really gets me. It makes her seem so sweet, so lovable..."

The embarrassment finally caught up with me, and words started to fail me. Was this simple infatuation? With a girl who was actively avoiding me?

"Anyway, that's pretty much it," I said, trying to indicate that the conversation was over.

"Y' see, I was still just a child when I first met my wife," I told the wolf girl beside me, letting my mind wander back to a long-ago time. "Well, perhaps *met* isn't the right word. I only saw her from a distance."

I was a freshly minted warrior then. I had only been on the battlefield a short time, and I was desperate to show what I could do. But I was failing. I was just a young fool with no achievements and nothing to offer a highborn young lady. Thus when the chieftain and his family visited our fortress on the front lines to drum up morale, I only saw them—including his daughter Cerise—from a long way off.

"I sincerely doubt she even remembers it," I said. I had been just one of hundreds of warriors. I, however, was astonished at the beauty of the chieftain's daughter and the gentle words with which she encouraged us. I knew she was different from me. Born different. Well, I suppose that makes her sound like some sort of separate species. To me, she may as well have been.

I said, “If you asked my wife about our first meeting, I suspect she would tell you the *second* time we met.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“It was a couple of years later. The chieftain’s family was on another tour of the front lines, and there was a great gathering to raise the troops’ morale. Bahairam chose that moment to launch a sneak attack, throwing everything into confusion.”

“Erk... I s’pose I should apologize...”

“Did you order that attack?” I asked. The wolf girl shook her drooping head. “Then worry not. In any case, it was what brought me and my wife together.”

“Really?”

“In the chaos, I stumbled upon the chieftain and his daughter, who hardly knew where to go. I protected them as we worked our way into the fortress’s inner sanctum. I must have felled many a Bahairamanian soldier that day, but to be quite frank, I was so single-mindedly focused on my task that I don’t remember the little details.”

All I knew was that that day, I discovered that I possessed a strength I could never have believed. I’d hefted the elderly chieftain under one arm and his daughter under the other and ran. I beat away any Bahairamanians who tried to stop us with a club tied to my tail, or else I simply kicked them back. And I never stopped running.

My actions gained me some notoriety among my people. We lizardmen were just one small part of the Holy Eldant Empire, such that saving our chieftain was not an act deemed worthy of much notice by the humans. It gained me little prestige in the Eldant military, which preferred to promote humans whenever possible. Yet for exactly that reason, the chieftain and his daughter thought especially highly of what I had done.

“I continued to fight on the front lines after that, but on the occasions when I had leave to go home, I found myself rather popular, and the chieftain’s daughter always made time to come and see me. She insisted that it was only right, as she owed me her life.”

“I hear ya... I could definitely see fallin’ in love with someone who saved you.”

“Mm... Well, that was only the seed of our romance,” I said. “As for me, my reputation seemed to have taken on a life of its own...and I was scared

of it."

"You, scared?"

"Indeed. I came to wonder if there was some other Brooke out there, doing these deeds and earning these accolades. Someone I wasn't. After all, every time I came home, the story of my accomplishments seemed to have grown."

"Ah..."

"Looking back on it, I suspect the chieftain already had it in mind to marry his daughter to me. And if a chieftain's daughter is to marry a young man of no rank and no station, his reputation may need to be...helped along, you might say."

"G-Gee, is that how it works?"

"I dare say."

Three years passed. The intense border dispute between Eldant and Bahairam dragged on, giving me ample opportunity to contribute to my own growing legend. I was granted Eldant citizenship and put in charge of a lizardman squadron. Even then I found I wasn't content to lead from behind, but felt compelled to continue fighting at the very front.

"I never felt I had caught up with my own reputation," I said.

"That sounds depressin'..."

"Well, in due course, the chieftain told me I should marry his daughter. I wasn't personally opposed to the match, and in any case, it is a duty to produce offspring when you're of the appropriate age. I had no reason to refuse her."

The wolf girl blinked. "So you're sayin'...when you married Cerise-san, you weren't, y'know, head over heels in love with her?"

"I certainly didn't dislike her, but I suppose the best I can say is that at the time, in light of our respective stations, I knew this was the most ideal choice."

One might also say that neither she nor I had much latitude for choice.

"Then..."

"That's right. We didn't get married because we were, as your kind like to say, *in love*."

As I said, finding a mate and producing offspring is considered a duty among my people. Love as such doesn't enter into it. At least not in the traditional lizardman view.

“Much happened after that, and—as I believe you know—I was unable to protect the eggs my wife had laid, meaning I had failed to fulfill the duty to produce children. Because I was still with the Eldant army, I was still frequently on the front lines. I wasn’t living with my wife.” We both tired of that arrangement, and I left the military—but I left my wife as well, taking the farthest job from soldiering that I could find. “I believe you know what happened after that.”

“Ya got married to her again. But...”

“Yes, we reunited. But it was being able to work here at the master’s house—being able to read his books...*manga*, as I believe he calls them. When Shinichi-sama was teaching Myusel to read, I was able to join their lessons occasionally, you see. And it began to change how I thought.”

I learned some words I hadn’t known before. Words like *love*: a bond between a man and a woman forged not by duty, but by the heart.

“My wife and I, you might say, skipped over ‘love’ when we got married.”

“Gosh...”

“Now, we’re going back and discovering that love we didn’t experience before. Having a second bloom of youth—or perhaps a first. I must say, I’m quite enjoying it!”

I supposed the elders in our village might have said she and I had been tainted by human values. Yet I, who had never known any gratification besides achieving military success and making myself famous, could now hold my head up high and declare that I was *happy*. The smallest things now gave me the greatest pleasure: the chance to touch my wife’s skin, to share a trivial conversation with her. It was thanks to Shinichi-sama that I had learned to think that way.

“Love is a fine thing,” I said.

“Six kids and *now* you’re sloppy in love, Lizard Guy?” The wolf girl sighed—but the corners of her mouth turned up, showing her teeth. I took this to be a smile—an expression we lizardmen weren’t capable of making with our jaws. So I had managed to make her feel a little better. “But thanks, hey?” she said, and got up.

It was a good ten days later that Shinichi-sama and Myusel came home again. I guess they'd decided to let him stop at the mansion so that he could get ready for the wedding. Me an' Hikaru-sama should've been there to welcome them, but I was still feeling embarrassed. Y'know, awkward. I just stayed in my room, and I guess Hikaru-sama did the same.

But then I heard it.

"To send a woman to Shinichi with his lucky-sukebe-protag personality, hoping to blackmail him into doing what you wish—you were wrong to imagine that it was even possible! Did you think such a cliché plot could ever work on the likes of *him*?"

That was Her Majesty the Empress! I'd been feeling a rumble in my stomach and had just left my room for the kitchen when I heard her in the living room. I peeked in to see her and Shinichi-sama, along with Myusel and some guy I didn't know. They were arguing about something, but what I noticed was Shinichi-sama's face. It felt like forever since I'd seen it. The face of the man I loved—but who hadn't chosen me. Myusel was on one side of him, Her Majesty on the other.

Part of my conversation with Brooke flitted through my head.

"I hear ya... I could definitely see fallin' in love with someone who saved you."

"Mm... Well, that was only the seed of our romance."

Come to think of it, I'd fallen in love with Shinichi-sama because he'd saved my life. But Brooke called that "only the seed." So what had helped that seed to grow since it was planted? Obviously, my "day" had made the nearest man—namely Shinichi-sama—look awfully attractive. But I think what really did it was that he never said I grossed him out. Instead he called me cute or outright attractive. Me! A girl from a different people altogether, a werewolf at that. And not a very smart one...

"I... You... I mean, you, Elvia... Elvia Harneiman... I love you very much!"

“Look, beast people just have a different sensory experience from humans. I guess elves are close enough to us to make it work, but sometimes there are gaps you just can’t overcome. That’s not your fault...”

Thinking back on it, Hikaru-sama had been exactly the same. In fact, he’d never said he loved Myusel or Her Majesty. Just me. Even though I was a dumb, airheaded beast person. Even though he knew the difference between us meant there would be “gaps we couldn’t overcome.”

In fact, Hikaru-sama had saved my life too. There was really hardly the least difference between him and Shinichi-sama. Maybe if I’d met Hikaru-sama first...

“.....I guess tellin’ him that wouldn’t make anything better, would it?” I sighed and left the living room behind.

The guy I didn’t recognize was arrested and taken away by some knights. Shinichi-sama, Myusel, and Her Majesty, along with some servants, were all going to stay at the house. Hikaru-sama and I couldn’t just hide in our rooms and never say hello. We worked our way to the living room, where we heard about what had happened with Her Majesty’s marriage proposal. I guess when you’re the empress, even just saying “I love you” and getting married can be a pretty big job. It was more than a commoner like me could imagine.

Later, I was walking down one of the mansion’s hallways, going to do my business, when I bumped square into Shinichi-sama coming from the bathroom.

“Oh...” I said.

“Elvia,” he said. “Uh, feels like it’s been a while, huh? How’re you doing?”

“Oh! Uh, fine. Yeah. Fine,” I said, making a gesture I had learned from the manga he’d shown me. A guts pose, I think they called it.

But it didn’t fool him. “Are you sure? I just mean, you looked a little down too...”

“Me too? Who else did ya see?”

“Oh, y’know... H-Hikaru-san.” Shinichi-sama stumbled over the name a

little, unhappy. “We were the ones who kept telling Hikaru-san he should tell you how he felt. We wouldn’t give him a break about it. So knowing that’s why things are awkward between you... It doesn’t feel great. I mean, I feel really bad about it. You two were pretty close, right?”

“Oh...” So he’d figured it out. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Man, it really is tricky, isn’t it? You know, stuff. The last few days have made that crystal clear to me.” He sighed.

“Whatcha mean?” I asked.

“I mean, like, whether you fall in love with someone. I can see how rough Petralka has it. For people with social status, it’s like, that status can bring a lot of benefits, but then it means things like that you can’t just follow your heart when it comes to love. I realized it’s not easy being royalty. But I’ll bet royals aren’t the only ones with that kind of problem.”

He smiled a little and scratched his cheek.

“Um, Shinichi-sama?”

“Yeah?”

“Do ya think love that starts with someone’s social status...isn’t love?” It would explain why Brooke had had such a roundabout path with his wife. And why I...

“Hm? No. It can make things more complicated, but love is love. You know, it’s a flag. Social status might be what gets it started, but it’s not enough to make anyone fall head over heels. Sure, status or title might be part of what makes a person attractive, but it’s hardly the whole thing. It’s about whether or not you fall in love with an entire person—titles and all.” He shrugged. “Plenty of rulers have been deposed and found themselves just ordinary citizens. Or someone’s title might get taken away or changed. If that’s why you fell in love with them, and then it changed, maybe you’d find you weren’t in love anymore.”

“Shinichi-sama...”

“That’s why I keep insisting I’m not marrying Her Majesty the Empress —I’m marrying Petralka. The same way I’m not marrying a maid. Just Myusel.” The look on his face at that moment was one of...pride.

I didn’t say anything right away, but it made me think. The moment Shinichi-sama had proposed to Myusel, I’d been awfully disappointed, but I hadn’t felt sad or lonely or upset. Nothing like that. Actually, since Shinichi-sama was gonna marry Myusel *and* Her Majesty, it would’ve been

easy enough for me to say maybe he should marry me too. Then he could have one of those harems he was always talking about. It would have been a perfectly natural suggestion.

Somehow, though, I found I couldn't work up the urge to actually say it. I knew what this was. It had to be...

"Hey, Elvia? What's up? You sure you're okay?" Shinichi-sama asked. He was so thoughtful. As for me, I was just kinda standing there, staring into space. I must've looked pretty dumb.

After a moment, I said, "Thank ya, Shinichi-sama!" Those were the last words I spoke to the man I'd loved so much before I went running off down the hall.

As I went back to my room, I came to a conclusion: my first mistake had been letting myself get pulled into telling Elvia how I felt just because of the palpable expectation in the air. Whatever my feelings, by telling her at that moment, it could only seem like I was trying to make a move on Elvia while she was devastated by Shinichi-san's rejection. Trying to force your way into a girl's freshly broken heart—hell of a way to start a romance! If I really loved Elvia so much, I would have waited a while. Given her some time. Well, it was a little late to be worrying about that now.

I sat on my bed, brooding as these dark thoughts chased themselves around in my mind.

That was when I heard "Hikaru-sama!" and the door flew open with a *bang!* that practically warranted a printed sound effect. Most of the doors in this house were supposed to be protected with automatic magical locks, but I guess I hadn't shut mine completely. The sheer force caused the door to slam against the wall, which sent it back the other way. This time I heard it lock firmly as it shut itself.

"E-Elvia?" I said. There she was, having bounded into my room. She came striding straight over to me. "Wh-Whoa, hey! Elvia!" I said.

With zero regard for how shocked I was, she placed her hands on my shoulders. For a second I wondered if she was just going to shove me flat on my back, but she stopped short. "So it's okay if I *come* to love you, right, Hikaru-sama?"

Well, that was a question you didn't hear every day.

"For that matter, it's startin' to look like I fell in love with you a long time ago. That okay?"

"I-Is what okay? I mean—I mean, yes, it's okay! It's good! That makes me very happy. But, uh... What's going on here?"

None of that really explained why the beast girl had burst into my room and looked about to do who knew what with me. Things were happening too fast for my brain to keep up. So now Elvia was in love with me? Was she returning the feelings I'd expressed?

And another thing. There'd been this awkwardness hanging between us for two whole weeks now, and suddenly she was all over me. What had happened? Maybe Shinichi-san coming home and saying he was going to marry the empress had helped Elvia move on? Or maybe...

"You really want me?"

"I really want you!" I exclaimed. I felt a touch of annoyance, though. After all this, with us...like *this*...she was still asking that? "But you need to explain what's going on!"

"I've been holdin' it back, but I can't anymore. I'm gonna let it *all* out. You just better be ready," Elvia said. Her face was flushed and she was breathing hard. It almost looked like...

"Hold on, Elvia! Today's your 'day,' isn't it?"

Elvia's "day" was pretty much like a girl getting her period. It came once a month, and although I wasn't particularly concerned about it, Elvia didn't go out of her way to hide what was happening, so I had a pretty good idea of when it came.

But she said, "No, it's not! Well, maybe tomorrow or the next day! But that's not the point!" She was beet red.

"Then what?" I still thought this change of heart was probably just biological. Nothing to do with Elvia's real feelings. Heck, even menstruation could be a few days early or late depending on how a woman was doing mentally and physically. I figured this was about the same thing.

"It's got nothing to do with my 'day'! I may not be real bright, in fact I may be pretty dumb, but I've thought about it as hard as I can, and I finally realized! And after that, I couldn't hold back anymore!"

"Elvia..." Gosh. She wasn't exactly articulate—but she sure was earnest. Maybe she had more in common with a boar than a wolf! That was what

made her so lovable. That was why I loved her.

“Hikaru-sama! I love ya so much!” she said.

“I love you too,” I said.

That lovely, lovable wolf girl pushed me back onto the bed, and I wrapped my arms around her and drew her close. Maybe it was the excitement that made her body feel so warm. But what I noticed even more was the softness.

“Elvia...”

She answered me with a kiss, hungrily, and then we didn’t need any more words.

It was the day after Shinichi-sama had gone back to the castle, and I was in the kitchen, helping my wife cook breakfast. For us lizardmen, “cooking” meant chopping something up small enough so we could put it in our mouths. Maybe passing it over an open flame if it had been wounded, to make sure it wasn’t dangerous to eat. The human preoccupation with ingredients and preparations was not something we usually worried about.

We did have to do a lot of cooking—simply because our brood was so large. With Shinichi-sama’s permission, we grew fruits and vegetables in a field behind the mansion. I had picked some and was washing them. Man’ya and her siblings laughed and played, my wife and I weaving our way around them. It was a perfectly ordinary morning scene. Until Man’ya called out, “Daddy!” She slapped my knees as I was busy hauling a basket of vegetables.

“What is it?”

“Something weird!”

“Weird? What do you mean?” I asked, and she pointed toward the dining room. I went to the kitchen, where Cerise should have been wiping down the table in preparation for breakfast—but then I stopped in my tracks. It was Hikaru-sama and Elvia.

Not that I was shocked to see them there. They lived in this house, after all. I’d seen them at breakfast just yesterday. Maybe they were a bit earlier than usual, but that was hardly what I would call “weird.”

Nonetheless, things clearly were different from yesterday. Something in

the air.

"Hikaru-sama!"

"Yes? What is it, Elvia?"

"Hikaru-sama!"

"Yes, Elvia? What's going on?"

"I love ya so much!"

"And I love you too, Elvia."

"Yeah, but I love you more!"

"I don't know. I have a suspicion I might love *you* more."

"Y-Ya won't out-love *me*, ya hear?"

"How would we even decide who wins that contest?"

"Well... Hey, Hikaru-sama, anyone ever tell you you can be kind of mean?!"

"How was I mean?!"

I stood silently. Being a lizardman, I didn't always have a strong grasp of the nuances of human facial and vocal expressions, nor those of werewolves, who were quite humanoid as well. Still, the way they sat practically touching each other, the way they were constantly holding hands and caressing each other's hair, leaning against each other—it was unmistakably not the way they had been behaving yesterday. It was, in a word...

"Weird," Man'ya repeated.

I realized Cerise appeared to have escaped outside. I could see her through the window leaning against a tree in the garden, bracing herself with one hand. The children were looking at her, concerned.

Ahh. She simply couldn't stand it. I could sympathize. In fact, I decided to join her. I picked up my daughter and evacuated the kitchen.

"I guess I'm glad they're both back in high spirits," I mumbled.

"Daddy?" Man'ya said.

"I suppose this must be what they mean when they say 'I can't even.'" I'd learned the expression from Shinichi-sama's manga.

Then my daughter pointed at the couple and said, "Daddy, what's that?"

"Hrm. I think they had a word for it in one of the master's, erm, anime. What did they call it? Ah, yes... A *bacouple*."

"*Bacouple*?"

A simple, almost elegant combination: the word "couple" together with

“*baka*.” As in, idiots.

“Yes... That would be the word,” I said, and nodded.

Chapter Three: *Her Name Is Koganuma Minori*

A sweet aroma drifted through the mansion. If you need an analogy, I would say it was like someone had just baked cookies with plenty of vanilla extract—a little too much, really. It was a reminder that it was possible to overdo anything. I might even have called it cloying.

I paused. In front of me were, indeed, what appeared to be fresh-baked cookies.

I was in the former headquarters of the General Entertainment Company Amutech—what you might have called its villa. We were in a largeish room that served as both the living room and a working space.

That's right: *we*. I wasn't alone.

"They taste good, sure," I said, taking a bite of one of the cookie(-like thing)s. Arranged neatly on a little white plate, they crunched when you bit into them and a sweet flavor filled your mouth. Yes, very good. Sweet but not too sweet. They even smelled refined. As snacks went, there was nothing to complain about.

I wasn't surprised—Myusel hardly seemed capable of a mistake in the kitchen, whether making a full meal or little snacks like this. These cookie(-like thing)s had started when she'd come to me saying she wanted to make "Shinichi-sama" a snack like the ones in "Ja-pan," and I'd taught her how to bake them. Sort of. I was never really the cooking type, so instead I just gave her a recipe I'd found on the web (I'd looked it up once when I thought I might use it for something or other) and happened to have saved to my phone.

She wanted to offer her beloved husband a taste of home. What a devoted young wife! And so good at cooking too! I practically wished she had married *me* instead! Well, *practically*. You know. Anyway, it wasn't like you were going to get thrice-refined Japanese sugar around here.

Just as a point of interest, Myusel was already Shinichi-kun's wife, so she wasn't really our maid anymore, but when they were around the house she continued to wear her maid uniform. When we asked her about it, she sort of blushed and said, "It's...what I was wearing the first time I met Shinichi-sama. He told me how good it looked on me... How cute I was... His own words..."

Okay, cool. Enough of that.

"They're delicious, Myusel. The best!"

"You mean it? Thank you so much...Shinichi-sama!"

Yes, Shinichi-kun and Myusel were right there in the room with me. He was doing battle with some paperwork at his desk, but he was also munching on the cookies perched in a corner of his workspace, and conveying his appreciation of them to Myusel, who hovered nearby. To be fair, none of that was anything new. We were all used to it by now.

Shinichi-kun stopped writing. “Myusel... Uh...”

“Yes, sir? What is it?”

“Do you think you could stop with the *Shinichi-sama* stuff?”

“What? But...”

“I mean we’re, you know, husband and wife now...”

At that point, he stopped short and clenched both his fists, pressing them against the desk as if fighting some feeling. So that was it. Those simple words were so thrilling, so shy-making, all at once... You know, he could always just *not say them*.

“...We’re h-h-husband and wife, and...and stuff,” he concluded, looking up at her. “‘Shinichi-sama’ just sounds so distant, you know?”

“Oh! Y-Yes, I... I understand. I think?”

“You could just, uh, call me Shinichi.”

“Yes, but...ahem...you’re also Her Majesty the Empress’s most honored and honorable husband, Shinichi-sama...”

“Oh, yeah. I mean, I guess...”

“But if you insist, perhaps, um...” Myusel’s eyes darted one way and then another. “I could call you, er, ‘my dear’?”

“Who-hoooaa! The sheer destructive power of those words! Ahem. A-*hem*. Anyway.” He cleared his throat, clearly hoping to change the subject. If he was that embarrassed by it, then personally I thought he should have simply not brought it up. But I didn’t say anything.

“This snack really is delicious. I mean, like, *delicious*! Gosh! My bride is so cute, and now I find out she’s a killer cook too...” Whoops, he was fighting a feeling again. I guess *bride* was another trigger word for him. “W-With a b-bride like that, how could I not be the happiest man on earth?!”

“Shinichi-sama! And I’m the happiest woman!”

Like I said. *Cloyingly* sweet.

The sweetness came rolling off them in *take-this-and-this-and-one-of-these* waves. If you could have measured the sugar in the atmosphere, it

would have been off the charts. Approaching fatal levels, I suspected. Even I was starting to get embarrassed. I looked away from the lovey-dovey young couple in preparation for making my escape...

...and my gaze landed upon Elvia and Hikaru-kun, sitting on the nearby sofa.

"C'mon, Hikaru-sama. Say *ahh*!"

"Ahh!"

"How 'bout it? Taste good?"

"Yeah, delicious! Hey, what's with the look?" Hikaru-kun asked, cocking his head. He was so pretty—long, flowing black hair and a genuine all-around loveliness—that it felt like a waste that he'd been born a man. I know that's not how you'd normally describe a guy pushing twenty years old, but believe me, in this case it was true.

"Huh? Oh, uh..." Elvia seemed to have been completely lost in gazing at Hikaru-kun, and when she snapped back to reality she smiled with a touch of embarrassment. "These treats are... They're from your home, right, Hikaru-sama?"

"Broadly speaking, I guess."

"Right... If they make you that happy, Hikaru-sama, maybe I should learn to make 'em too." She fidgeted bashfully. What was her deal? She seemed like a completely different character all of a sudden.

"Elvia..." Hikaru-kun said.

"B-But I'd probably screw 'em up," she said, chuckling and scratching the back of her head with embarrassment. "I kinda do everything by the seat of my pants... And I don't always think of flavors the same way you do..."

"*Au contraire*!" Hikaru-kun declared. "Cooking is love! Your feelings for the person you're cooking for are the best spice of all!"

"Hikaru-sama!"

"Even if you did screw it up a little, how could I leave a single bite of anything you labored to make for me yourself? I'll eat every crumb, I promise. I won't let anyone else have any."

"Oh, Hikaru-sama!"

"Oh, Elvia!"

They stared at each other in absolute rapture. In fact, I had the distinct sense that something very wrong was about to start happening right here in front of all of us. They obviously weren't aware of anyone except each

other.

"All right, *enough*!" I cried, smacking the desk with a noisy *bang!*

Everybody froze: Myusel and Shinichi-kun, who practically had a background of flower petals falling behind them. Hikaru-kun and Elvia, looking deep into each other's eyes and seeming like they were about to jump on each other. With a collective silence and then a collective blink, they turned to me. I couldn't help feeling a little dejected at the *Huh? You're here too?* looks.

"Minori-san? What's the matter?" Shinichi-kun asked.

I groaned. "The *matter* is you people *melting* all over each other! Especially you, Hikaru-kun! And Elvia!"

"Sorry?"

"Wh-Whazzat, Minori-sama?"

"We're supposed to be working!" I snapped. As a matter of fact, there was another long table piled with more paperwork in front of Hikaru-kun and Elvia's sofa. The company formerly known as Amutech might not exist now that the relations between the Japanese government and the Eldant Empire had been dissolved, but that meant that the bulk of its activities, like running the school, now fell to this mansion—the so-called "Amutech villa."

The word *villa* might make it sound like a vacation getaway, but it was, in fact, a place of business. Shinichi-kun and Hikaru-kun both had lots of work to do. If anything, they were busier than ever. Now that the connection with Japan had been cut off, the supply of otaku stuff had dried up, meaning they had to preserve the things we already had, make duplicates of anything they could as backup copies, use those supplies as the basis for secondary works, and for that matter set up a system for producing primary works—or even better, establish an environment that would foster the production of such works.

"I know," Hikaru-kun said. "I *am* working."

"How can you work with Elvia sitting on your damn knees?!"

Elvia was stretched out across Hikaru-kun's legs, and had been for a while now. In fact, she was practically spooning him. Hikaru-kun didn't seem embarrassed and didn't even seem to think he was doing anything wrong.

"You can see how calm Elvia's being while I work. It's no problem at

all," he replied.

What was this—defiance?!

"It's obviously a problem!" I said. "It's obviously a *big* problem!"

"She's right. I think the way you're acting is a little much, Hikaru-san," Shinichi-kun said. "This is a workplace, and we *are* supposed to be working. I know this is your house too, so it can be hard to change mindsets..."

"Oh, *you're* one to talk," Hikaru-kun said, glowering at him. "You allegedly commute from the castle to this mansion to work, right? So changing mindsets should be easy for you."

"Huh? I mean, yeah, sure..."

"But there you are, grabbing Myusel's hand or petting her hair every chance you get!"

"No! Y-You saw that?!" Shinichi-kun turned bright red. So did Myusel. Apparently, they'd been under the impression that no one had noticed them. They could hold hands under the desk, so at least that was kind of discreet. But the hair thing? How could they think we wouldn't see that? Besides, Myusel being who she was, she got redder every time she touched Shinichi-kun's hand.

"So now who's mixing business and personal affairs?!" Hikaru-kun said.

"You're the last person I want badgering me about that! How many times do we have to hear '*Ooh, I love ya so much!*' '*Mmm, me too!*'?! Are you stuck in a loop? An infinite loop?! Are you going to go on forever until we free you from the circle of time?! The Law of Cycles, is that what this is?!"

"Ohh, I see what's going on here. You see us getting all lovey-dovey, and you're starting to think Elvia's the one that got away. What a shame for you. Elvia's in love with me now! And I'm never giving her back!"

"Hikaru-sama!"

"Guh?! No! Moderation! I'm talking about restraint!"

Yeah, I don't think you have any right to be lecturing anyone about that, Shinichi-kun.

"It's just, these endless declarations of love..." Shinichi-kun groaned.

"Hey, you could do it too," retorted Hikaru-kun. "Not that I think you have the guts for it, you yutz. But what about you, Myusel?"

"Wha? Oh, e-er, yes?" she yelped, startled to suddenly be the topic of

conversation.

"You want Shinichi-san to say it, right? Tell me the truth—has he *ever* said it to you? Has he ever actually said 'I love you, Myusel'?"

"Oh, y-yes, he has. When we're alone together..."

"Oh yeah? When you're alone?"

"Yes. Like last night..."

"*Shhhhhttoohhhhppp*!" I yelled, slamming the desk with both hands this time. *Bam! Bam!* I was rewarded with more *Oh, you're still here, Minori-san?* looks.

I can't believe these people.

"Could you all *not*?! Even I can't take it anymore!" The constant kissy-kissy lovey-dovey huff-huff hummana-hummana (infinity x2) while I was trying to work! I'd been doing my best to put up with it. I had endured. I had survived! That was what members of the JSDF did—my training had drilled that ethos into me! I thought I had mastered it. But I hadn't trained for a constant barrage of PDAs! (Understandably, I guess.)

"I-I'm very sorry, ma'am..." Myusel said.

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that," Elvia added. They both drooped, looking genuinely contrite. Heck, knowing them, they probably were. As for Shinichi-kun and Hikaru-kun, they traded uncomfortable looks.

I found myself feeling a twinge of guilt too. In an effort to be conciliatory, I said, "Well, erm, not to sound too much like Shinichi-kun, but there's a time and a place for everything. That's all I'm saying."

To be fair, it wasn't that I couldn't understand their feelings of happiness. Shinichi-kun and Myusel had only been married for a month; they were still literally and figuratively in the honeymoon phase. Since Shinichi-kun was also married to Her Majesty the Empress, Myusel was technically his secondary wife—but given how long she'd adored him, I didn't think it really mattered to her whether she was his primary wife or a concubine or what. She'd been allowed to marry him, was able to be with him, and you could see the happiness that inspired in her every minute of every day.

As for Hikaru-kun and Elvia, they'd been an official couple for about—you guessed it—a month or so. Elvia had been making public declarations of her love for Shinichi-kun since before Hikaru-kun had even come to the Eldant Empire, but just when Hikaru-kun had thought there was no chance

for his own feelings—that his love would forever be unrequited—the clouds parted, he and Elvia got together, and they both lived happily ever after. (Or at least for a month so far.) It seemed like Elvia had something of an inferiority complex stemming from a number of factors, including maybe her relationship with Shinichi-kun, and having Hikaru-kun tell her to her face that he loved her, in spite of and including all of that, had helped heal her heartbreak in a hurry.

Like I said, that all made sense to me, on a rational level. I was perfectly happy to see them living in bliss. That was why I'd put up with this for as long as I had.

But... Buuut..... What's obnoxious is still *freakin' obnoxious*!!! Having to watch not one but two couples throw themselves at each other every single day, being forced to see it all from point-blank range—who wouldn't get tired of it?

I shifted in my chair. "Sigh... I'm happy for all of you, I really am. But speaking as an unwillingly single young woman, it just gets to me."

"Minori-san..." Shinichi-kun and Hikaru-kun exchanged another look. "U-Um, I'm sorry about that, Minori-san. You're right. I definitely got a little carried away," Shinichi-kun said.

"Me too. I'll try to be more careful," Hikaru-kun added.

Erk... Being faced with the profoundly sorrowful looks of two younger men was a painful experience for me, whose years without a boyfriend exactly equaled her years of being alive. Very painful, in fact. It was bad enough that I wanted to throw myself on the floor and burst into tears right then and there. I was, however, a grown woman and a member of the Japan Self-Defense Force. This was a moment to display my maturity and magnanimity.

"Yeah, well... I guess a little bit wouldn't hurt. A *little* bit." I smiled as best I could. "At least I can, you know, put you all in a BL fantasy in my mind."

"What?!" Shinichi-kun goggled. "Us? In a BL... What are you talking about?!"

"What do you mean, what? When a person sees a couple, their brain automatically makes the switch, doesn't it?"

"You make it sound like that's as obvious as the sun rising in the east!"

"Sure. I just picture you as my favorite couple, or sometimes I mentally

turn Myusel and Elvia into guys so that it's Dude Myusel/Shinichi-kun or Guy Elvia/Hikaru-kun, or I come up with totally new ships all my own. That sort of thing."

"Hang on just a second!" Hikaru-kun exclaimed.

Me, I discovered I was starting to feel better watching them get all upset, so I went on as casually as anything: "Remember what I said? If she were a guy, Elvia would be all puffed up..."

"Stop, stop! Please, stop! Elvia's one thing, but...*other ships*?!"

"So I can BL-ify you if I pair you with Elvia?! It's really all right?!"

"Huh? That's not what I—"

Admittedly, the Hikaru-kun/Elvia pairing was more of a *yuri* thing, what with him dressing like a girl and all. That was exactly where the challenge was, the romance! I gave them a thumbs-up and said, "There's more than one world out there!" I gazed far, far into the distance. "There are different world lines, people galore. The number of possible combinations is limitless..."

"I feel like you're just kind of...twisting things to make them sound nicer to you," Hikaru-kun said.

"How else am I supposed to endure all this?!" I said, a little louder than I'd meant to. Hikaru-kun didn't have a comeback. Heh... I'd won! Even if I wasn't sure what exactly. That's how the world works most of the time: the person who shouts the loudest and the longest is the winner.

"Anyway, we do need to be thoughtful when we're at work," Shinichi-kun said in an effort to sum things up. It looked like at least everyone had come back to their senses. Myusel was nodding and took a step away from Shinichi-kun. Elvia scrambled off Hikaru-kun's knees and sat beside him like a normal person. Okay, so I didn't expect the tooth-rotting sweetness in the air to go away just like that, but at least we'd stepped away from the brink. Hopefully.

"But, uh, Minori-san?" Shinichi-kun said. It sounded like he'd had a thought. "If you're so worried about being single, why didn't you go out with Loek when he asked?"

I blinked. "What a question! Loek has Romilda!"

Loek Slayson was an elf boy who'd had quite a thing for me. Every time he saw me he insisted he was in love with me. Currently, though, he was going out with Romilda, a dwarf classmate of his. They always used to

fight, and at first I think they genuinely didn't like each other—but somewhere along the line, their relationship had started to change. I knew it. Everyone knew it! After that, butting heads became like their way of saying they cared about one other.

They still argued at school all the time, but by now it seemed like it was practically an expression of love. Even the other students could be heard to say things like, "Huh! The lovers are having another spat!" Nobody paid them any mind, and it was clear to see that Loek and Romilda were enjoying themselves.

"Anyway, Loek... He's my *student*," I said.

"Er, yeah..." said Shinichi-kun. He seemed to see where I was coming from. Like him, I was a teacher of otaku culture at our school, which meant Loek and Romilda were both pupils of mine, not to mention my *kouhai* on the path of otakudom. What I felt for them wasn't romantic love, but a desire to see them be happy.

"Besides, notwithstanding what I said... I'm not, like, eager to make out with someone or whatever," I said.

"You're not?" Shinichi-kun looked at me as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

"Yeah. I'd much rather see my *oshi*s doing it."

"You never budge, do you?" Hikaru-kun said. Elvia, standing next to him, was asking what *oshi* meant.

"The joy my boys give me fuels my very life!" I said and was about to go on when my phone started to vibrate in my pocket.

At the same moment, Myusel looked toward the door and said, "Oh, I think we have a visitor." As a half-elf, her hearing was much better than ours. Still, noticing the newcomer at the exact same moment as the alarm system was a pretty good trick even by her standards. Then again, maybe the alarm wasn't as quick as it used to be—with no more Japan, it wasn't getting regular maintenance.

I walked to the window and peeked out between the curtains. The first thing I saw was several of Shinichi-kun's bodyguards gathered around the mansion's gate.

Now that he was Her Majesty's husband, he had to have some muscle with him anytime he went anywhere. Normally, that job would have fallen to the royal guard, but Shinichi-kun thought it was a good opportunity to

help soften the racism that sometimes characterized the Eldant Empire. His guards were a mixed group consisting of all kinds of different races—lizardmen, elves, dwarves, werewolves. Not everyone had been happy about that, so the members of Shinichi-kun's personal guard weren't elevated to the status of royal guards. Nonetheless, they were treated as knights, and it meant that demi-humans now had one more path they could take to advance themselves in the world. A pretty good result overall.

TL;DR, Eldant soldiers were now doing what used to be my job. Now I was Elvia and Hikaru-kun's bodyguard, and head of security at our mansion and the school. I also taught at the school, like I said, and helped out with Shinichi-kun's work when and as I could.

Now I looked past the gaggle of bodyguards and spotted something unusual at the gate. "A white carriage?" Vehicles like that were only used by the royal family. This one didn't look quite like the carriage Shinichi-kun and his wives rode around in. Each of the royal carriages had subtle differences, while, more obviously, the crest on the side of each was distinct.

The driver got down from the bench and opened the door, and I could see the passenger stepping out. He had long, silver hair that glimmered in the sunlight. A calm look and distinguished facial features. A cape that billowed in the wind, just enough to be elegant. The picture of manly beauty.

"Garius-san..."

The name dropped from my lips almost without my realizing it. Shinichi-kun and the others exchanged surprised looks.

My name is Koganuma Minori. I was a member of the Japan Self-Defense Force. The Japanese government sent me to another world—namely, the Holy Eldant Empire here—to serve as the bodyguard for Kanou Shinichi and Ayasaki Hikaru, who had been tasked with spreading otaku culture.

Notice the past tense there?

About six weeks ago, we'd closed off the hyperspace wormhole that had connected the Earth to this other world, meaning that now there was no

JSDF here, no official bodyguards, and no General Entertainment Company Amutech. And of course, no Japanese government to back us up, meaning that now we were just some ordinary people who had stumbled in from another world.

Not that we were suddenly at a loss for what to do or something. We started working the network of local people we'd developed and continued living pretty fulfilling lives.

Shinichi-kun was doubly married—to Myusel Fourant, the maid who'd served by his side his entire time here, and to Petralka an Eldant III, a.k.a. Her Majesty the Empress. Bigamy was definitely not allowed in Japan either legally or socially, but here no one batted an eye, and Shinichi-kun was busy going gaga over both his wives.

Hikaru-kun was head over heels for Elvia Harneiman, who'd come here as a Bahairamanian spy and had ended up hired by Amutech (in the form of Shinichi-kun) as the company's in-house illustrator. Again, very fulfilled.

And then there was me. Head of security at home and school, sometime teacher, helper-out with Shinichi-kun's work when I had the chance. Since my security duties naturally saw me working closely with Eldant forces and sometimes even giving them instructions, I had been formally awarded the status of knight. I was given some military honors and even a modest stipend.

When the hyperspace tunnel had closed, there was a lot of uncertainty about what would become of us without Japan to give us its political backing or supply trade goods. It was anxiety-inducing to know we could never go home again. Thankfully, though, everything had worked out all right, thanks almost entirely to the intercession of Her Majesty the Empress Petralka an Eldant III and her right-hand man, Minister Garius en Cordobal. The fact that "outlanders" like us had achieved so much and risen so high in the royal esteem was a cause of some jealousy and occasional discontent among some members of the nobility, but for the most part people accepted it. As for us, we got down to kicking back and enjoying our "second lives" here in Eldant.

Or at least, that's what should have happened.

In the fading light of evening, the boy grabbed the young man's wrist as he tried to make his escape. "Wait!"

"No! Let go of me!" The young man tried to free himself, sending a ripple through his long hair, but the boy was stronger than he'd thought; he didn't so much as flinch. In fact, he gripped the young man's wrist even harder.

"Listen to me, Sarius!" the boy said, giving him an earnest look. His eyes reflected the orange light as they gazed up directly into those of the young man.

"Shinji..." Sarius said.

"I have to tell you how I feel about you." The words, so quietly uttered, caused Sarius's eyes to widen. He listened closely to catch what came next.

But what came next was a different voice, a startling interruption. "Hold it right there!" Both men looked up—and went speechless when they saw who had entered the scene. "I'll take that, thank you."

The man who had appeared wore a calm smile, but he was glowering at the boy. He approached step by step, Sarius's look growing more distraught by the instant. "Rigalt..."

Sarius's whisper only caused the other man to smile, not unkindly. His shadow stretched until it engulfed the young boy, making them indistinguishable from each other.

"And that's what's in the book I'm giving you this time."

"I see..."

"Sarius's ex-boyfriend, Rigalt, appears just as Shinji is discovering how he really feels! What will Shinji, the ultimate klutz, do when confronted with the world's most perfect top?! Will Sarius be torn apart by his feelings for both of them?! It's part one of a three-part storyline. How about it?"

"Hrm. If I may ask, how does this one turn out?"

"After a three-way where Sarius total-bottoms, he and Shinji get together."

"Hmm..."

"Aww, you don't like it?"

"I can't say I'm not interested. But it doesn't sound very...edifying."

“Okay, well, how about this one? It’s a sweet little confection about Sarius and Shinji that takes place in a different world.”

“Hmm? Ahh, now, *this* one...”

I’d stood all I could stand until I couldn’t stand no more. “.....NOoooooooOoOoOoOOO!” I cried, interrupting them just as Minori-san was about to hand Garius a book of extremely dubious quality. They both stopped cold.

“Huh? What is it, Shinichi-kun?”

“What the heck are you doing?!”

It had been about half an hour since Garius had arrived at the mansion. Myusel, falling back on her maid habits, had been about to answer the door, but Minori-san had practically shoved her out of the way and gone outside to meet him. We waited and waited, but she didn’t come back, so Myusel and I had taken a break from work to go look for her. We’d checked all over the house, and had finally found them sitting on the sofas in the guest room, facing each other over a table. A table covered in really questionable material! It was clearly doujin stuff—manga style, and in two major categories...

“What does it look like?” Minori-san said. She glanced at Garius and then gave me a very puzzled look. “I’m asking Garius-san for his opinion on these BL manga.”

The obvious implied follow-up was: *Got a problem with that?* I felt myself go limp. If Myusel hadn’t held me up, I might have collapsed to my knees right there. “Shinichi-sama, are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine... Just fine...” I gave her a weak smile, somehow managing to support myself on my own legs. That doujinshi, though... It was clearly of Eldant make. Not something we’d brought in from Japan.

We’d helped the locals develop some forms of printing technology, though without electronic printers or copiers, the methods were decidedly analog. Sometimes the printing would be sort of blurry, or the pictures might be out of alignment—the sort of things that would have been immediately evident to anyone accustomed to reading Japanese doujinshi. I guess, admittedly, the hand-copied look had a certain charm...

“Anyway, about those character names. Is it just me, or do they sound weirdly familiar?”

“You’re imagining it,” Minori-san said promptly.

“And the way they’re drawn on the cover, they *look* familiar too. Or is that also my imagination?”

“Definitely your imagination.”

“And those books, they’re reversed,” I said. The names on the covers of each book were swapped—the so-called “reverse couple story.” Was that even a thing here? I’d heard rumors that wars could break out among fujoshi just based on the positioning of the names on covers! Not that I knew how they fought.

Incidentally, if you’re wondering why a guy such as myself would be so conversant in the niceties of this kind of material, it’s because Hikaru-san had briefed me on the ins and outs of the fujoshi “industry.” In order, he said, to make sure I didn’t step on a land mine by making some inept pronouncement about that stuff in front of Minori-san. (If you’re wondering why Hikaru-san, who’s actually a guy despite the girls’ clothing he always wears, was such an expert in all this fujoshi stuff—well, I wondered too. But it was a little late for all that, so let’s just forget it.)

“That’s true. I admit it’s a tricky spot...” Minori-san placed a hand to her bountiful chest. Behind her glasses, her eyes drifted shut. She looked the very image of a gorgeous, bespectacled young woman dreaming an impossible dream—if you ignored the actual content of what we were talking about. “Not everyone goes for switches, and some people are downright dogmatic about their couples...”

Switches? Oh, she meant “switched” couples. I guess meaning, you know, like the “up and down” or “left and right” or whatever were flexible.

“But!” The WAC’s eyes shot open. “I think every bit of it is delicious!”

“I’m gonna pretend I don’t know what that means!”

“Besides, you have your GariShin...*ahem!* I mean, your *Sari*Shin stans, but then you have your ShinSari people, and it’s only fair to meet everyone’s needs, right?”

I pointed an accusing finger at her. “Did you just say ‘GariShin’?! I’m sure you said—”

“A slip of your ears!” Minori-san replied, whistling innocently.

When had she produced this doujinshi, anyway? I thought she’d told me once that she wasn’t into making that sort of thing—that she didn’t have any artistic talent, so she was just on the consumer side. Hold on... Surely one of the students hadn’t done it? Had Minori-san’s fujoshi virus begun to

spread among the student population? No! That would be awful!

"You're okay with this, Garius-san?!" I asked. "With these...*books*?" It was obvious that nothing I said was going to get through to Minori-san, so I decided to try her friend. Somewhere along the line, he had picked up one of the books and was flipping through it. I knew he'd been borrowing BL from Minori-san for a while now, but still, didn't it bother him to be the inspiration for an actual character in one of them? I'd seen the look on his face when he was reading one of the books a few minutes before. For that matter, Minori-san had some nerve giving him books featuring...him! (I really didn't think the name change counted for much.)

"Mm," Garius said, closing the doujinshi. He placed it back on the table, comparing it with its companion volume. "I'm partial to SariShin, myself."

"What?!"

More fool me, thinking I should ask him! He and Minori-san resumed their BL banter as if they couldn't even hear my voice.

"Huh! So you're the SariShin type, Garius-san?"

"Have you any others?"

"I've got back issues in my room. Hang on a second, I'll go get them."

"Hang on, yourself!" I said, rushing up and smacking a hand down on Minori-san's shoulder before she could get off the couch.

"What's the matter, Shinichi-kun?"

"What's the matter?! Garius-san, did you really come here just to have a personal BL conference with Minori-san? At this hour of the day?" He knew perfectly well that these were work hours at the mansion—and that work here meant a lot more than just "cultural" projects. I'd been importing —okay, *smuggling*—manga and light novels and stuff into Bahairam since before we'd lost contact with Japan, and for quite a while now we'd been producing the same kinds of materials (on the up and up) for export to Eldant's friendlier neighbors. We couldn't do anime or games yet—stuff that required specialized equipment to produce—but printing and copying, we could manage.

In short, our work was also economic, political, and even military. That was why Petralka, Garius, and Zahar-san endorsed my daily commute from the castle to Amutech's "villa" and/or the school.

"Ah. Yes, of course. My apologies," Garius said softly. He sounded like his mind was elsewhere—like he was worried about something. He got up

from the sofa and walked over to me, the soles of his shoes scraping on the floor. He placed his hands on my hands, which were still on Minori-san's shoulders. "I must ask for your help, Shinichi."

It must have been my imagination that made his voice sound pleading and his eyes look beseeching. Yeah, I was imagining it. I had to be... Right?

"What? M-My help with what?"

"I'm afraid I can't speak of it at the castle..."

He lifted my hands up to his chest, gazing at me. Gah! Even I had to admit that seeing such a hunk at such close range was quite an experience. His eyelashes were so long, and his nose so perfectly formed. I could definitely see the resemblance between him and his cousin Petralka, and I wondered, when Petralka got a little older, would she look something like this? ...I mean! Not the point!

"What?! Has the moment of confession come at last?!" Minori-san, turning herself practically all the way around on the sofa, had her hand to her mouth, and her eyes were shining passionately. I could see the grin on her face behind her hand, although she seemed to think she was hiding it.

"No, stop! I'm a married man!" I said. I had two lovely brides, Myusel and Petralka!

"Don't misunderstand," Garius said with a shake of his head. Phew! So he wasn't about to say he was in love with me. But in that case, what was with the hands? Having another guy clasp my hands didn't exactly thrill me. In fact, I wished he would let go! "As it happens..."

Garius's distinguished brow furrowed in the slightest look of distress as he began to explain what was going on.

He never did let go of my hands.

"Married?!" I yelped. We were all in the living room, where Garius had explained what he was here for, and the looks on our faces must have been completely ridiculous. It was just so unexpected, hearing that word from his mouth right here, right now. "Garius-san, you're... You're getting *married*?" My voice sounded strange to my own ears.

Minori-san, Hikaru-san, Myusel, and Elvia wore similar looks of astonishment. But the handsome Eldant noble shook his head. "No, I'm not.

I declined the proposal."

Well, that shouldn't have been surprising, I guess. Garius en Cordobal stood first in line for the imperial succession—as in, he was the second most important person in the Holy Eldant Empire. He was gorgeous, he was smart, and he was an accomplished soldier in his own right. There was hardly anything to criticize about him—of *course* every girl in Eldant and beyond would want to marry him.

There was one reason he still didn't have a wife even though he was more than old enough for it: he preferred men. A person's sexual orientation doesn't change just like that, if it can change at all. So Garius had stayed unmarried all these years.

"Well, all right then," I said.

But Garius sighed and said, "The trouble is...it isn't working." This wasn't like him. He sounded so small and vulnerable.

He told us that no matter how many times he refused, the other party refused his refusal. That other party, incidentally, was a prominent noble from the kingdom of Zwelberich, a long-standing friend and ally of Eldant's and a place with which Garius was very familiar. She came from a prominent and *fertile* family whose members included the Queen of Zwelberich herself. Naturally, a marriage between a major noble household and the imperial family of a neighboring nation was more than a personal matter. A proposal from a powerful ally couldn't be refused *too* bluntly—or too many times. Garius didn't know what to do.

"You hadn't heard about this, Shinichi-san?" Hikaru-san asked in surprise. It was a fair question—now that I lived in the castle and was Petralka's husband, you might think I would have some sense of what was going on in national politics...

"Petralka and those around her have been quiet about it at my request," Garius said. "Since I wasn't planning to accept, there was no need for the wider world to know about the proposal. And of course there's the other party's reputation to consider. I thought the matter could be resolved quietly. But it seems..."

"Yes?" Hikaru-san asked.

"It seems that's no longer the case. I've been informed they'll be coming here in three days' time."

"Your proposed match, you mean?"

“Indeed...” Garius nodded and sighed again. He really looked bad...

In short, I guess Garius wanted to make this noblewoman give up on her plan to marry him, but he hoped we could help him figure out how to let her down gently. I could understand why he would ask. There weren’t many people at the castle he could turn to for something like this. Sure, there were advisors and counselors, but they would be thinking in terms of political gain, and—as long as there wasn’t some obvious problem with the proposed match—they would probably tell him to suck it up and get married for the good of the country. And given how he had all but forced through my and Petralka’s marriage barely a month ago, he wouldn’t be in a strong position to ignore the matrimonial and foreign-policy advice of the castle’s more powerful occupants.

In other words, I was partly responsible for his predicament. Sure, it evidently wasn’t preying on his mind so badly that he couldn’t get lost in a conversation about BL with Minori-san (so badly that he forgot why he’d come here), but then again, maybe he was trying to use that as an escape from reality.

Hikaru-san cocked his head and said, “If you don’t mind my asking, what reason did you give for declining the proposal?”

“That I had no interest in marriage at all at the moment.”

“Well, that’s safe enough, isn’t it?” Hikaru-san said, nodding. A sort of it’s-not-you-it’s-me refusal. Most people would probably have taken the hint and backed off. “But this person is still pursuing you?”

“So it seems.” Garius’s smile was somewhat bitter.

“Well... Maybe this is the time to tell her outright that you’re only interested in guys?” I ventured. Only once the words were out of my mouth did I realize: I didn’t know if Garius had ever publicly admitted to that. The Japanese government had had him pegged as “the kind who likes men” from pretty early on, so I’d thought maybe it was something of an open secret in Eldant. I tried to backpedal. “That would be a last resort, of course...”

I quite suddenly found someone’s hands on my shoulders. I blinked and realized it was Minori-san, who’d swept up to me and taken my shoulders...hard. Like, she was *squeezing*. She looked like a predator intent on its prey; her fingers became like claws...

“M-Minori-san, that hurts...”

“Oh! Sorry.” She let me go right away, but then she pushed up her glasses and leaned in really close. “Shinichi-kun...”

“Y...Yeah?” I flinched at her saying my name at point-blank range like that. Minori-san was so beautiful and so sexy, as long as she kept her mouth shut, but I really—no, no, that’s not relevant. The shock only lasted for a second, because looking straight into her eyes from so close, I had nothing but bad premonitions of what was about to happen. I knew from experience—terrible, terrible experience—that when that look came over Minori-san’s face, she was planning something I didn’t want any part of.

“This is where you have to step up,” she said.

“Um... I do?”

“Yes! You have to look that young lady in the eye and say: ‘*Garius is mine and you can’t have him!*’” She was practically giddy, but I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Why would I do that?! And why would I sound so intense about it?! That wasn’t me... That was someone else, right? Anyway, I sure hoped so.

“Save it for your doujinshi and your personal fantasies, Minori-san! I’m not doing that!”

“Wha?” The exclamation was definitely one of surprise, as if the speaker simply assumed I would do what Minori-san had asked. But it hadn’t come from her.

“Uh... Why do *you* sound so shocked, Garius-san?” I said.

“Oh. I mean...you won’t do that?”

“No!” Who did this rotten pair think I was?!

“But it’s the fastest way, isn’t it? If she realizes Garius is already in love with someone, she’ll *have* to give up! You could give her a classic *kabe-don* wall slam, or—no! I know! Put your hand gallantly to your chin and be like, ‘*I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but he’s absolutely mad about me!*’” She was nodding along with herself as if to say *Right? Right?* Her behavior, taken by itself, was that of an innocent young maiden—but the words coming out of her mouth were rotten to the core.

“If that’s your plan, then I’m definitely the wrong person,” I said.

“How so?!”

“Because I already have Myusel and Petralka!” *Because I like* girls*! Because I’m married! Twice!* Myusel and Petralka were both definitely real, actual girls, and I was totally in love with them! I wasn’t about to pretend to

have the hots for someone else—a guy, at that!

I turned and met Myusel's eyes. She looked at me shyly and put a hand to her heart as if to stop it from pounding. We'd been married just a month, and a lot had happened to us, but everything she did still seemed so fresh and new! As ever, my wife was just too cute! There's no way my wife could be this cute, is there?! (Wait, did those two contradict each other?)

"Aww," Minori-san said, pouting. But the fact that she was stroking her chin thoughtfully implied that even this Queen of All Rottenness could see that there was some logic to what I was saying. Maybe not everyone was super-aware that I was married to Myusel, but my marriage to Petralka was definitely common knowledge. Anyone trying to investigate me wouldn't have to look far to figure it out. That definitely made me unsuited for this particular game of pretend.

Even if I did go along with Minori-san's little plan, it would imply that I was trying to have both my wife *and* her cousin under my thumb, and that would look pretty darn suspicious.

"Maybe Hikaru-san could do it," I suggested.

"What?!" He looked even more scandalized than I had. What an unusual reaction. He was staring daggers at me; I'd definitely gotten a rise out of him. Excellent. He'd given me enough grief about being an awkward loser or whatever. No one would blame me for tweaking him a bit.

"That's perfect!" Minori-san said, clapping her hands. She couldn't have looked more pleased with the idea if she'd tried. "Hikaru-kun! Yes! With him on board, we could—"

"Whoa, hey! Slow down, Minori-san! You know Elvia and I are—"

"I've got it! We dress Shinichi-kun in women's clothes and pass him off as Minister Cordobal's fiancée!"

"What the hell is wrong with you, you rotten WAC?!"

"That's *former* WAC!"

"Yeah, but still rotten!"

And the corruption could never be reversed... Er, never mind.

"I think that's a great idea."

"Hikaru-san?!" He was grinning openly at me. He really knew how to exploit an opportunity!

"You can pretend to be a girl," he said. "A real *otoko-no-ko*! Go ahead, play the part—Garius-san's beloved! That will solve everything."

“It won’t solve anything!”

“It may solve something.”

“Quiet, Garius-san!” What was he doing, nodding?! What was with the little smile on his face?!

“Don’t you worry, Shinichi-san. I’ve got ten years of experience passing myself off as a girl. I’ll teach you everything I know—you’ll be the belle of the ball!”

“Wait, *how* long have you been cross-dressing?! No, I mean, if you’re so good at it, we should just have *you* do it!”

“Elvia, do me a favor and shut Shinichi-san’s mouth. With extreme prejudice.”

“Y-Yeah, sure!”

“Mrgh!!!” Elvia clapped a hand over my mouth from behind before I could manage a retort. And because she had never really learned how to hold back, she clapped her other hand on the back of my head and pushed, threatening to crack my skull. I looked desperately at Myusel for help, but given that this situation involved the royal family, she seemed hesitant to intervene.

“You can leave the outfit to me too. I’ll have something whipped up in three days.”

“We’ll need a wig. Which do you think would look better on Shinichi-kun, Garius-san? Long hair or short?”

“Difficult question...”

Arrrrgh! They were completely ignoring whether I even wanted to do this! Which I didn’t! Cross-dressing wasn’t *my* hobby! And I definitely, for sure had no interest in cross-dressing in order to pretend to be another guy’s girlfriend! I just wanted to pass pleasant days with my *two* adorable wives, enjoying the little satisfactions life had to offer!

...Which, I know, left me open to all kinds of potential comebacks. It didn’t matter, because I couldn’t get the words out; with Elvia’s hand over my mouth, the best I could manage was a frenzied, muffled grunting.

It was no use! At this rate... At this rate, I was doomed to become a beautiful bride!

Just as I was sinking into the utmost depths of despair, I heard Myusel say, “Wha?” I looked up, following her gaze to the window. Whereupon—

“Garius!”

With no warning whatsoever, someone came jumping into the living room. His hair, which looked like literal threads of gold, flowed gallantly behind him. He was no less handsome than Garius, but he also boasted a distinct elegance and exuded the aura of someone used to being in control. His almond-shaped eyes were blue as the sky, but I saw small yet unmistakable clouds of distress in them.

I recognized him. It was Rubert Wollyn, the Prince of Zwelberich. The last time we'd met, he'd been arrayed in magnificent shimmering garments, as befitted a prince. Today, by contrast, his outfit almost looked downright simple. Maybe this was how he dressed when he wasn't dealing with matters of state. Anyway, he was one of those guys who looked infuriatingly good no matter what he was wearing. It seemed a little unfair to an ordinary person like me, but let's set that aside for now.

"Wha?!" I said. All of us froze at the appearance of this entirely unexpected visitor. How had he even gotten in here?! The window was still closed, and the entrance to the living room was on the opposite side from where he was standing.

"Wh-What are *you* doing here?!" cried Garius. You couldn't miss the shock in his voice. Prince Rubert took a step toward us and opened his mouth, presumably in order to answer Garius's and our question. But at exactly that moment...

"Impudent cur!!!"

The window glass shattered as my bodyguards came crashing through it, flipping and spinning so fast you could almost see the *twirl-twirl* sound effect above them. One was a dwarf, the other a lizardman, and they both had their swords out and looked ready to kill.

"Oh!" I said, immediately sizing up the situation. Specifically, how bad it was.

From what I could tell, Prince Rubert had appeared and gone flying into the mansion without so much as a how-do-you-do, and my bodyguards hadn't known who he was. Why should they? The average soldier wouldn't necessarily know the face of a royal from another country, and at the moment, Prince Rubert was hardly dressed like an heir to the throne. As far as my guards could tell, he was just an intruder who had appeared out of nowhere.

I was about to call off my guards when I realized Elvia's hand was still

over my mouth. She was frozen, still processing the situation. There was an audible *whoosh* as the swords came down at Prince Rubert.

Oh, crap! Understandable misunderstanding or no, if my guards injured —or, at this rate, even killed—the prince of another country, it would almost certainly mean war! And we had about one second before that worst-case scenario became reality. I could feel every hair on my body stand on end as the swords came down on Prince Rubert's shoulders. One classic diagonal cut, one classic reverse diagonal cut. They were going to carve an X into him; with all the power of a dwarf and a lizardman, he was going to go flying in four chunks like in some kind of manga.

Except he didn't.

"Wha?" I said again. That became "Whoa!" as the swords collided, steel ringing against steel and throwing my bodyguards off-balance.

Prince Rubert stood serenely, shedding not so much as a drop of blood. My guards stepped to the side, trying to regain their fighting postures. They prepared to slash again, but hesitated for a second, unsure what to make of what had just happened.

"Whazzat? What's going on?" Elvia said, eyes wide.

"I suspect it's some kind of illusion magic," Myusel said.

Oh... That would make sense. I'd seen it before—magic that enabled you to make a copy of yourself. The Kingdom of Zwelberich was supposed to be particularly advanced when it came to magical illusions, so much so that some of the spells were military secrets. That would explain how Prince Rubert had appeared so suddenly, and how he'd gotten through the window and the wall.

"Please, get clear!" my guards cried, darting past Prince Rubert to stand between him and us. "This man is using some unidentified form of magic!"

"No, stand down. It's all right," Garius said, finally regaining enough of his composure to say what I was physically unable to at the moment.

"But Minister Cordobal!"

"That man is the Prince of Zwelberich, our ally. Raise your arms against him one more time and you, your families, and your entire clans will all be beheaded." Garius wore his most severe look. My soldiers froze and didn't move a muscle.

Once my soldiers had been stationed in another room, we apologized again to Prince Rubert. Yes, his appearance had been an illusion and he himself was completely unharmed, but it was still a fact that my guards had attacked Zwelberichian royalty. That could easily have sparked an international incident.

But Rubert said, “Think nothing of it. In fact, as you’re now the husband of Her Majesty the Empress, it is I who should seek your forgiveness for my intolerable rudeness.” He gave me a slight smile. “Your bodyguards were merely doing their job. They deserve no blame. Indeed, they should be praised for the alacrity with which they responded to an unfamiliar person appearing at this mansion. They seemed quite competent—at least for demi-humans.”

“Uh...er, sure,” I said evasively. I’d almost forgotten how deep anti-demi-human bias ran in Zwelberich. In any case, Prince Rubert was pointing out that my guards had proven their nerve, and that deserved praise, not punishment. You could see he was cut from the same cloth as Petralka or Garius—true royalty.

“And now, perhaps, you could explain what brings you here,” Garius said with just a hint of displeasure. He could take this somewhat brusque tone with Prince Rubert because they weren’t just royals—they were also friends. In fact, if what I’d heard was true, it was more than that. They were more like ex-boyfriends. Although I made it my business not to learn too much about that.

“What if I said I came to see your handsome face?” Prince Rubert said with a grin.

“I would say you were joking, and to stop.”

“Ridiculous. Have I ever joked around with you? I always speak with the utmost seriousness.” Prince Rubert sat down beside Garius as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

.....I mean, I guess it was? Since there were no other seats open? But he was just a projection. It wasn’t like he was going to get tired standing up. I had questions.

“If it’s not a joke, then it must be a lie. Either way, you remain as cunning as ever.”

“Is that all the warmth you have for me? After all the nigh-insuperable obstacles I overcame to reach you?” Rubert shook his head sadly. Nothing

seemed to faze him, which was part of what made it hard to believe he was being serious. Every gesture he made looked somehow theatrical. Rehearsed. “I heard that someone from my very own country had proposed marriage to you. I can’t claim to understand how it came about, but I tried to talk to her. I *told* her you were mine, but she wouldn’t listen!”

“Holy crap! Did you actually say that?!” I burst out, my eyes wide.

“Of course. What about it?” Rubert sounded almost blasé.

Hmm. So was same-sex love considered ordinary in Zwelberich? It’s true that in the Warring States era in Japan, there had supposedly been a saying that a man wasn’t a man until he’d made love to both a man and a woman. And there were plenty of examples in nature of animals who sought same-sex love. Plus I’d heard of an elite military unit, the Hieros Lokhos, I think in ancient Greece, composed of male lovers.

“And since when have I been yours?” Garius replied, still sounding understandably annoyed. He was playing the part of the tsundere to perfection. Except for, you know, being a guy.

“Oh, you know exactly when. Since the time you found yourself alone in an unfamiliar land...” As he spoke, Prince Rubert slid closer to Garius. Garius slid a little farther away from him.

.....Ummm. What were we seeing here? I averted my eyes, somehow feeling it was wrong to look directly at what was happening. Beside me, Minori-san had her hands over her eyes and her face toward the ceiling.

Wait... What? Wouldn’t she normally have been drinking in this moment?

“Whatcha done shown me? What’s all this?” she was mumbling.

“Uh, Minori-san?” Was she...crying?

“A real lovers’ quarrel... Incredible... I can’t look straight at it! It’s too wonderful... I think I might ascend straight t’ heaven!”

“Minori-san, please come back to your senses, I’m begging you! Also the stuff you’re saying sounds really strange. I’m not even sure where you’re from anymore! Aren’t you afraid of getting Kansai people mad at you with that terrible accent?”

“This is Eldant, no one will notice.”

I hardly knew what was going on anymore.

“You’re right. I was young, and felt lost, and perhaps I took the first

hand that reached out to me. I didn't question it—but it was only a moment's confusion," Garius said.

"You would dismiss our days together as a moment's confusion? I'm hurt," replied Rubert.

"Presently, my heart is inclined toward *this* person," Garius said—and looked at me.

"Ah, I knew it... At least, I suspected."

Don't suspect that! I wanted to shout. I wished Rubert would stop looking at me regretfully like that! It was frightening for any number of reasons! Anyway, hadn't Prince Rubert attended Petralka's and my wedding? He'd just been talking about me being the empress's husband a minute ago! So why would he just swallow what Garius was saying hook, line, and sinker?!

I had to fight desperately against the voice in my heart that threatened to burst out with any number of comedic interjections.

"Oh, Minori-sama, she—!" Myusel exclaimed.

"M-Minori-sama!" Elvia said.

Beside me, the former (but still rotten) WAC was collapsed on the sofa, pale with moe. The most we could do was put our hands together. You know, pray for the repose of her soul. And then leave her alone, lest she take things here in an even weirder direction.

"So someone proposed marriage to Minister Cordobal. You heard about it, felt you simply couldn't ignore it, and came all the way here to do something about it. Is that right, Prince Rubert?" Hikaru-san said, trying to get us back on something resembling the topic.

"I tried to talk to her, I really did, but I just wasn't getting anywhere." Rubert was starting to sound a little more casual. "Ilara is a relative on my mother's side. I know her well." So the name of Garius's (prospective) bride was Ilara. "She can be rather headstrong. Doesn't always listen very well once she gets an idea in her head. It can make her hard to talk to. That left me with only one option—to come here and speak to Garius personally. Lacking much in the way of time, however, I was forced to do it in this form. You must excuse my rudeness."

Eldant and Zwelberich had cordial relations, but they weren't physically adjacent to each other. When Prince Rubert heard that Ilara would be in Eldant in three days, it was understandable that he would feel the pressure.

So much so that he didn't even take the time to let anyone know he was coming.

"I'm hoping you'll let her down, Garius—gently," Rubert said.

"That's my intention, of course," Garius said, but no sooner were the words out of his mouth than Minori-san, who had appeared for all intents and purposes to be dead, revived. Was this what they called a philosophical zombie? (Note: No, it's not.) I had no idea what had brought her back to life, but she started moving haltingly, like a puppet with its strings cut trying to move on its own. It was pretty unsettling, to be honest. Myusel and Elvia both yelped in fright.

"We have the perfect plan for that!" she announced, talking a little too fast. Her cheeks were flushed and her breath was coming hard. So much for being a zombie—she was *definitely* alive, and, uh, actually looking pretty sexy. I might have savored the moment under other circumstances, but right now I just had one big, bad feeling. "We're going to tell her that Garius already has a girlfriend!"

"Hold on, Minori-sa—" I started.

"But Shinichi-kun keeps whining about how he doesn't want to do it, the selfish little f—"

"Selfish?! How am I being selfish?!"

"So maybe *you* could do it, Prince Rubert! *You* could put on women's clothes and pretend to be Garius's lady love!"

"How can you even suggest that?!" I yelled. Did she! Even know! That she was talking! To a prince?! The prince of a real country?! Gah! Why couldn't she just have politely expired right there on the couch like she'd looked like she was doing?

I turned to Prince Rubert. "I-I'm so sorry! She's just a little wrong in the head..."

"No, in fact... I think she may be quite right." Rubert put a finger to his chin, looking deeply intrigued.

Was he crazy too?! It was crazies everywhere I looked! Somebody get me out of here!

"Ilara wouldn't listen to anyone, even to me," the prince said. "Maybe telling her there's another woman involved is the fastest way to cement a refusal."

"Yeah, right?!" Minori-san nodded, leaning forward.

“Uh, but then, is the cross-dressing really necessary?” I ventured. Wouldn’t it be easier just to bring an actual woman along? Minori-san, though, was too obsessed with her idea to listen to me. Her eyes were blazing with a very rotten light as she turned to Hikaru-san.

“Hikaru-kun, you’d know how to make Shinichi-kun and Prince Rubert both beautiful, right?”

“But of course.” He nodded and puffed out his chest. He sounded awfully confident.

“Sadly, my physical form is not present here,” Rubert said, furrowing his brow and looking down at his body. Oh yeah. The Prince Rubert in front of us was just a magical projection. Even Hikaru-san wouldn’t be able to dress *that* in women’s clothing. And even if the real Rubert set out for Eldant immediately, it wouldn’t leave a lot of time to prepare. If he could have come himself, he would have done it already instead of using magic.

Wait... Did that make *me* the only option?

“N-No! No way! Uh-uh!” I jumped up off the sofa and hid behind Myusel. I confess that’s not very manly, but who cares? When you factor magic into the equation, Myusel was probably stronger than I was, anyway! Being forced to cross-dress was one thing, but if they were going to railroad me into pretending to be Garius’s girlfriend, then I was definitely willing to hide behind a woman. Call me a coward if you must!

“Shinichi-kun, does it really upset you that much?” Minori-san said.

“Sure it does! How could it not?”

“I see... Well, I suppose that’s it, then.” Minori-san sighed a very sorrowful sigh.

Uh-oh! Did this mean she was going to resort to force?!

I tried to get ready to fight (while still hiding behind Myusel), but Minori-san turned to Garius, her eyes profoundly serious behind her glasses. “There’s only one more choice, Garius-san. *You* have to do the cross-dressing.”

“Me?” he asked.

“The heck’s goin’ on here?!” I exclaimed. I was so badly overstimulated that my interjections were going Kansai-ben! I mean, it’s a nice thing to have around, Kansai-ben. Really the language of the heart. “I think we’re losing track of the real issue here! If we’re turning her down because Garius already has someone, how can he be the one to do the cross-dressing?!”

“Hikaru-kun, let’s get ready!”

“Leave it to me!”

My pained interjection was for nothing; everyone else was eager to get started. Hikaru-san was keeping an ironic distance as ever, acting like the whole thing was sort of a joke, but Minori-san was absolutely into it, completely serious... In fact, she sort of had those spiral eyes that implied she wasn’t quite sane.

Hikaru-san had a box of makeup tools (where had he pulled that out of?) on his knees and was taking out first one thing and then another, working on Garius, who sat obediently and submitted to his ministrations. I didn’t know much about makeup, but I could see him dabbing something on Garius’s face—foundation, was that it?—then running a brush over it before producing some bright-red lipstick...

Elapsed time: just five minutes. Terrifying.

“Oh, my!” Prince Rubert exclaimed in admiration when he saw Garius’s makeover. Was this magic? Was that what this was? The transformation had happened so fast that it almost felt like it.

“This is mostly an experiment. I just sort of winged the details,” Hikaru-san said. “But anyway, I think this should do as a start for our knight in ribbons.” He presented Garius with the mirror on the inside of the makeup box lid.

Garius studied the mirror for a long moment, looking more startled with each passing second. I didn’t blame him. I had to admit, he looked downright beautiful the way Hikaru-san had done his makeup. A certifiable *bijin*. I know that’s kind of a rotten way to put it, figuratively speaking, but the word really fit. You couldn’t alter his bone structure, so he was never going to have that hourglass figure. Instead, Hikaru had taken advantage of the angles of his face to give him a cool, sculpted look, somewhat androgynous in appearance. If he tossed a fashionable scarf around his neck to conceal how thick it was and hide his Adam’s apple, people might really believe he was a woman.

“Is that...*me*?” Garius asked, touching his cheek.

I didn’t think such a totally cliché reaction was strictly necessary, but nonetheless, I could sympathize. It was one thing when the makeup was intended to make you hideous, but becoming more beautiful felt good no matter who you were, man or woman.

Great. Until Garius turned to me and asked, “What do you think, Shinichi?”

“Hrngh?!” I vocalized. “Uh, wh-what do I... You mean, what do *I* think?”

He seemed very earnest about the question, so I stopped and took another good look at him. His gem-green eyes gazed straight back at me. His eyelashes stood out more than usual. The pink in his cheeks and the red on his lips complemented each other—Hikaru-san had done that deliberately, I was sure.

Somehow—I didn’t really understand how—the *man*-ness had vanished from his appearance. I guess you could influence the balance of the face a little bit by using shadows and highlights. Right? I thought I’d heard something like that in relation to cosplay makeup.

I mentioned earlier that Garius and Petralka looked a lot alike, and Garius in makeup looked eerily like a vision of a grown-up Petralka—one where full-blown feminine beauty had conquered girlish cuteness. It was as if I could see her right before my eyes, and it was... It was...

“Shinichi-sama?” Myusel brought me back to earth, rescuing me from the extraordinarily strange sensations that were bubbling up unbidden in my mind.

“Huh? O-Oh, uh, yeah, uh, Myusel?”

“N-No, it’s nothing,” she said and shook her head. If there was something she wanted to say, she should just say it. We were husband and wife, after all.

While I was desperately trying to maintain my emotional stability, Prince Rubert said, “Aren’t you going to ask *me* what I think, Garius?”

“Why would I ask you?”

“I knew you could do it, Hikaru-kun! It’s better than I ever dreamed!”

“Naturally.”

“Aw, wow! You’re really incredible, Hikaru-sama!”

Before I knew it, everyone except me and Myusel was crowded around Garius, oohing and aahing. Garius seemed to be enjoying the attention—in fact, he and Hikaru-san were talking about outfits together.

Um, guys? Guys? Is this really what we want? Are we sure about this?

Then again, if we weren’t sure, I guess we were back to *Shinichi better do the cross-dressing*, and I didn’t really want that...

I found myself assaulted by a sense of emptiness for which I didn't really have any words. I sat down on the sofa.

"Shinichi-sama?" Myusel peered at me, concerned. *Ah! My dear Myusel. My wifey-wife. You're the only thing I can see right now!* (Busy fleeing reality.)

Around me, people were talking:

"Don't you think a dark dress would be better?"

"No, no, silver is the best color for complementing your eyes, Garius."

"Since our concept is a 'princess knight,' I think purity is the operative motif."

Etc., etc.

Operation Put Garius in Women's Clothes went on for a good half hour before everyone spontaneously came to their senses and realized that this idea wasn't a solution to anything.

Some knights of the royal guard appeared to inform us that a visitor from the Kingdom of Zwelberich had arrived. Namely, Miss Ilara Clef. Third daughter of Duke Clef, a prominent noble of his country.

She wasn't here on official political business, but nonetheless, it would be rude to keep a member of the foreign nobility waiting when they had traveled so long and so far to get here. I ordered the knights to show her into the smaller audience chamber. I, Garius, was the only one present, so as to do the least damage to her dignity when I turned her down.

I waited, then waited a little more—and then there was a knock at the door, followed by the voice of one of the royal guards: "Announcing Miss Ilara Clef, honored daughter of Duke Clef, come from the Kingdom of Zwelberich for this audience."

"Come in," I commanded, and the door opened silently. A knight of the royal guard led in a young woman with light hair, accompanied by two female knights whom I took to be her own personal bodyguards. Her long locks might have been flaxen or golden depending on the light; they really were striking, even beautiful. She bowed politely to me as she entered the room. She wasn't the least bit intimidated as she walked in, nor did she attempt to flirt or flatter. She carried herself like she belonged there, like she

had been born to this. She'd always had a certain refinement, but the last three years had polished her to perfection.

"It's been a long time, Garius-sama," she said. She picked up the hem of her dress and curtsied. Her knights both got down on one knee respectfully.

This wasn't the first time I had met Ilara face-to-face, although I must say that our earlier encounters had taught me little about her. We'd met socially once or twice, as she was after all a relative of Rubert's.

Well, everything starts with a greeting. "You are welcome and well come, Ilara Clef," I said.

Her smile was soft. "You don't know how eagerly I've waited to see you, Garius-sama. I swear each day felt like an eternity. I was so sure you'd return for another visit to our country..."

Quite a way to start the conversation. Ilara stepped closer as she spoke.

"Then we heard that Her Majesty the Empress, who'd rejected my dear Rubert's marriage proposal, had finally tied the knot. I don't mind saying, that put the spurs to me. I realized that if I dawdled too long, someone might beat me to you." Then she giggled.

Truly, she was a formidable woman, or anyway, so it seemed to me. She sounded affable enough, but her message was clear: *Her Majesty the Empress rejected Rubert's advances—surely* you *won't refuse a match that would strengthen the friendship between our countries.* It wasn't quite blackmail, but it was close. Duke Clef was not a young man anymore, and I'd heard it said that Ilara, the daughter of his old age, was the apple of his eye. If that was true, it clearly didn't mean he'd spared her any education. She knew exactly what she was doing.

I, however, was not about to let her wrap me around her little finger.

"Miss Clef. I must apologize, but—"

"Garius-sama?"

"But as I have indicated many times in my letters, your intentions and mine do not align." Then, to make absolutely certain I was being understood, I added: "I am not going to marry you."

I thought she might get angry, or cry, or even simply stare in shock. Yes, I had expected any number of reactions, but a relaxed smile was not one of them.

"You mean you're not going to marry me *now*, yes?" Ilara said. "But Garius-sama, you're nobility. Royalty, at that. Eventually, you *will* be

expected to find a suitable match."

"I suppose... Yes, one day it may come to that," I said. In fact, ever since Petralka's marriage, I'd been getting a series of letters from Elder Zahar, who was still playing something of the recluse as he recovered, urging me to start meeting some prospective matches. He was almost like a father to me and Petralka, and now that Petralka had gotten safely settled, I'm sure he wished I would do the same and put his old mind at ease.

"In anticipation of that day, then, why not renew our acquaintance on the understanding that it will lead to marriage?" Ilara said, still smiling. She clearly believed there could be no better woman for me than herself. And it was true that, objectively speaking, she and the royal Garius en Cordobal would be an ideal pairing.

"This hasn't yet been made public," I said, standing and walking toward Ilara. She didn't react, but I saw the knights behind her tense up. I gave them a slight nod and simply passed by, positioning myself by the door to the audience chamber, which had been closed after Ilara and her escorts. "But truth be told, there *is* a woman toward whom my affections are currently inclined. She is the reason I cannot entertain your suit."

I opened the door myself. Standing in the hallway—just as we had arranged—was a young woman. She had long, black hair and wore a sumptuous dress that had been prepared for her. She looked much different from usual—indeed, I realized this was the first time I had seen her in such a state.

She herself had hesitated, claiming that she had never once worn a dress, and that she wasn't one for luster or glamour—but seeing her now, I felt such claims went beyond modesty to become sheer self-deprecation.

"This is my...beloved," I said.

She entered the audience chamber, looking uncharacteristically nervous. As for Ilara and her party, they looked like they couldn't believe what they were hearing.

As Minori-san entered the audience chamber in her dress, we—meaning me (Shinichi), Myusel, Petralka, and Hikaru-san—watched from the shadows. Petralka had instructed the royal guardsman at the door to leave

the door ajar, so from where we were standing we could just see inside.

"Huh! A fine plan," Petralka whispered from beside me. "We wondered what you could possibly have in mind. To think, Minori as Garius's beloved!"

"Minori-san seemed the least likely to do anything risky. Besides, we were afraid that if we picked some random noble girl to play the part, there might be an argument later," Hikaru-san said. "Anyway, Minori-san's a knight. She's pretty much treated like nobility. And as far as falling in love with an outlander, there's a pretty strong precedent in the Holy Eldant Empire. Set by the empress herself."

"Y-Yes... We suppose so," Petralka said, flushing slightly. Wow! That was adorable. I couldn't believe I had such a precious absolute monarch for my bride. What was this, a dream?

Okay, anyway.

Three days ago, Garius had come to the "Amutech villa" to ask how he could safely turn down Ilara Clef's proposal of marriage. After we'd (rightly) rejected the cross-dressing idea, we'd spent the next half hour fretting about what to do instead, when Hikaru-san had had a brainstorm and come up with this plan.

"There's one surefire way," he'd said. *"Minister Cordobal, there already* is *a woman for whom you feel a fair amount of affection. One you go out with—or should I say, stay in with—all the time. Right? Just introduce* her *to this other woman. Then you won't have to try to hide anything."*

"Affection? No, there's no such woman..." Garius had said, looking doubtful. It was then that Hikaru-san had pointed at none other than Minori-san.

"She's from another world, so status and position are pretty much irrelevant. And they actually are good friends. It's such a perfect choice, it makes you wonder how we could have even thought about anything else," I said.

"And she looks so beautiful," Myusel said with a sigh.

It was true: wearing the dress Petralka'd had prepared for her and made up (by Hikaru-san and a real lady-in-waiting) to look like she belonged among the upper crust, Minori-san really was lovely. If she could maintain a quiet reserve, she'd definitely be a huge hit with the guys. She'd actually

been pretty popular among the members of the JSDF garrison, so much so that I could hardly believe it when she talked about her enforced chastity or whatever. I guess otaku do tend to think either way too much or way too little of themselves.

"I just hope this finally convinces Ilara-san to give up," I said. Garius had kept turning her down all this time, and now that it turned out there really was someone in his life, she would have to understand, right? My only concern was that when noble houses and highborn families were involved, concern for the family's reputation could take over and make people do strange things...

I kept watching, feeling remarkably nervous for something that didn't actually involve me. Garius and Minori-san stood with their backs to us, while Ilara-san faced them, looking the very picture of beauty, a genuine *o-hime-sama*. She was looking at Minori-san with undisguised shock. I couldn't blame her, since she'd just been abruptly informed that Garius had a girlfriend.

"Huh?"

Things had been going as we'd expected so far, but then Ilara-san composed herself, her amazement giving way to a slight, self-assured smile. She cocked her head inquisitively. What was that about? Shouldn't she be acting panicked or disappointed or something?

"Garius-sama, you must stop teasing so!" she said, a friendly smile on her face. "That woman can't possibly be your beloved."

Crap! Had she figured us out? But how?! We looked at each other, each of us realizing that we were dealing with a far more formidable foe than we had anticipated.

Truth be told, I got on board with Hikaru-kun's idea right away. I would be the one to play Garius-san's beloved! It was a fantastic suggestion. No wild makeup and no special training necessary. My lack of particular political commitments was definitely a point in my favor, and it was true Garius-san and I shared a certain friendship, as lots of people could attest. Okay, so most of them didn't know that we spent our time trading BL books and talking about BL stories, but that was exactly why it was perfect. If this

woman had been snooping around trying to dig up information on Garius-san before she came, this would all fit with what she'd heard—namely, that Minister Cordobal was making frequent visits to a woman who lived outside the castle.

I have to admit, I was a little disappointed that we ended up without any cross-dressing by "Minister Cordobal," but I lived in the hope that there would be another chance. Ultimately, I agreed to Hikaru-kun's plan. Anything to help Garius-san.

I owed a lot to Eldant as a country, and to Garius-san personally. It was mostly thanks to his and the empress's support that we could just truck along doing our cultural projects even without Japan's backing. I couldn't say no to an opportunity to repay even a little of that kindness. So I sucked it up and endured the humiliation.

I put up with letting my hair down, with putting on a noblewoman's dress that didn't look good on me, and with wearing the garish makeup. The high-heeled shoes, which I wore very, very rarely, were especially uncomfortable. They left me wishing desperately for a chair I could fall into and just kick them off, but that was something else I just had to cope with. It was a small price to pay, I figured, if I could torpedo Garius-san's wedding negotiations.

At least, so I had assumed...

"You must realize I know?" Ilara-san said, her heels clicking on the floor as she walked over to Garius-san and me. We stood and stared at her. "You prefer men, don't you, Garius-sama?"

She was whispering, as if unveiling a great secret. Garius-san and I were both struck dumb. He looked at her with an outright scowl on his face.

"I'm aware, naturally, of how *close* you and my dear Rubert were," she said, and smiled sweetly. But she was looking straight at me, and I could see the smile never reached her eyes. In fact, she was staring me down. It was like an open challenge.

"Why, then?" Garius-san asked. If she knew everything, why propose marriage at all? Why keep pushing the suit? Prince Rubert said he'd even told her that Garius-san was "his," but it hadn't slowed her down a bit. Apparently he hadn't been joking.

"That's *exactly* why," Ilara-san responded, still smiling. "My family gets to be the Eldant Empire's second-closest ally after the Zwelberichian royal

family. You get to maintain appearances. Not such a bad deal, don't you think?"

"I think—"

"I don't mind if the marriage is purely *pro forma*. You're welcome to stay right where you are and do just what you're doing, Garius-sama. In fact, I'm counting on it." In other words, she didn't need him to love her just because they got married. "That's what I've come here today to tell you."

Ilara-san took a step back, picked up the hem of her dress, and made a quick, curtsy-like bow. I could never have imitated her practiced, womanly movements. She was so beautiful, I simply couldn't keep up.

"I'm offering what amounts to a business proposition, Garius-sama. And I do hope you'll consider it."

I found my voice. "Don't you have any *feelings* about this?" I asked her.

Ilara-san focused her gaze on me. "I want Garius-sama to be happy. Whoever you are and wherever you come from...can you say the same?"

Her smile got wider, and this time, it was one of pride and triumph.

The air hung heavy in the living room of the Amutech villa, which is to say, our mansion.

"I sure didn't see that one coming," I mumbled to no one in particular. I was sort of hoping to dispel the suffocating atmosphere, but no one really reacted. They all pretty much agreed with me.

After revealing that she had effectively seen straight through Garius, Ilara-san said she would "be back tomorrow" and then left with her two knights. The way she did all of it with no fear, no hesitation, with her head held high—even those of us hiding in the shadows could only look on.

We'd gone back to the mansion with the intention of reworking our strategy, but after we were all settled in the living room, no one said a word.

Incidentally, Petralka had stayed at the castle—she had empress business to attend to—but Garius had come to the mansion with us. He described it as "getting away from the castle for a bit to clear my head," but for the most part he was probably looking to get away from *Ilara-san*. She'd said she would "be back" the next day, but she was actually staying at the castle, so

they might very well run into each other. Seeing how tenacious this woman was, it seemed like she might even try to bust into Garius's room and create a "fait accompli."

"All that beautiful makeup for nothing. What a waste," said—not Minori-san herself, of course—but Hikaru-san. In fact, somewhat miraculously, all the members of the "Garius Marriage Problem Resolution Council" were present, including Prince Rubert (or at least a projection of him), even though we hadn't called for him. He sat beside Garius. He really seemed to get around. For a royal, it looked like he had a pretty free hand to do what he liked.

"I'm sorry to have put you in that situation, Minori," Garius said. He sounded grateful for her help.

"Oh, no. It wasn't... It wasn't that bad. It's a useful experience to have had." Minori-san shook her head quickly. She was already back in her usual outfit. The glasses that she'd taken off for the audience chamber were back on her nose. She hadn't even waited until we got home; she'd asked for a room in the castle where she could change. I guess she hadn't wanted to spend a minute more than she had to in that awkward dress. Too bad.

"I'm the one who should apologize," she said. "I wasn't able to help you at all."

"That's not your fault. She was just way more prepared than we expected," I said. None of us had imagined she'd proposed marriage knowing perfectly well about Garius's sexual orientation and his relationship with Prince Rubert. And who could have expected her to just say outright that she didn't mind a sham marriage? There were would-be brides like that in fiction sometimes, but I'd sure never thought I would run into one. Politics, man. Scary.

"So it's pointless to say he's not into that stuff. It's pointless to say he has a girlfriend already. It's almost like none of that even matters to her!" I said. She didn't seem to care about Garius's personal situation at all. All she wanted was for him to agree to marry her. Frankly, the way she acted, it seemed like if Garius claimed he had five or six girls on the side, or if he dressed in drag and said "Actually, I've been a woman all along!" she would just calmly reply, "Yes? What about it?" or spit out one of those movie lines like "Well, nobody's perfect."

This was impossible. Like a game on Super Deadly Nightmare

difficulty. Like facing an opponent who was using god mode! I was just about at the end of my rope. But Garius sighed and said, “This might actually be a decent opportunity.”

“Are you serious, Garius?” Rubert asked, leaning forward and blocking my view (despite being a projection). He was Garius’s ex-boyfriend—I could understand if he wasn’t exactly a fan of Garius being forced to get married. Especially considering he still seemed to have feelings for him... Wait. Come to think of it, Ilara-san had referred to the prince as “my dear Rubert.” Almost like he was her big brother. I knew the Clef family had some sort of relation to the Zwelberichian royal line, but I assumed she was treating him as an honorary family member, not a literal one.

“I almost have to be impressed by the extent of her planning. Truly worthy of Zwelberich’s nobility,” Garius said.

“What does that mean?” Rubert asked, frowning.

Oh, yeah. He hadn’t been with us, so he didn’t know exactly what Ilara-san had said to Garius. Nor did Elvia, who’d stayed at the mansion while we went to the castle. This seemed like a good chance to get my thoughts in order and fill the two of them in at the same time, so I described what had happened between Garius, Minori-san, and Ilara-san in as much detail as I could remember. I turned to Hikaru-san to check myself once or twice, but for the most part my recollection seemed to be sound.

“Jeez... Is *that* how noble marriages work?” Elvia said, openly amazed.

“The whole ignoring-whether-people-are-in-love thing isn’t so different from Bahairam,” I said with a wry smile. There, marriages were arranged—or, if I may put it this way, made with all the ceremony of animal husbandry. The “honored father-ruler” made the decision, and at a word from him, everyone was married. I’d had a chance to see it up close when I’d been kidnapped and taken to Bahairam. But anyway.

“I see. Yes... She did indeed think this through,” Prince Rubert said, unable to keep a touch of admiration out of his voice as he folded his arms. Was he having second thoughts about opposing Garius and Ilara-san’s marriage? Was he on board now?

“Are you going to let this happen, Prince Rubert? Can you really live with it if Garius-san gets married?” I asked.

“I came here to stop what I thought was an unwilling match. But if he accepts it of his own free will, then I might be open to it.”

Well, that was a surprise. I'd thought Rubert was just against Garius marrying *anybody* and had come to throw a wrench in the works, but I guess what he'd really wanted was to prevent Garius from being unhappy. If both partners knew the marriage was basically fake and they were both okay with that, he didn't see a reason to oppose it.

This much was certain: if Garius and Ilara-san did get married, ties between Eldant and Zwelberich would be stronger than ever. Naturally, Garius would start visiting Zwelberich more often. And with Ilara-san's laissez-faire attitude toward any love affairs Garius might have... Could this be his and Rubert's best chance? Was that why the prince wasn't arguing anymore—because he realized that?

I kept my suspicions to myself. Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to, right?

"Is that really enough for you, Garius-san?" It was Minori-san who voiced the concern. She sounded uncommonly despondent, maybe because our plan had failed so spectacularly.

"She's right," I said. "I know she said you could do whatever you wanted, but I'm not so sure..."

Maybe Ilara-san really didn't care what he got up to—but would the same be true of the people around them? Marriage wasn't a purely personal matter, something I had very much learned firsthand when marrying the empress. I don't want to suggest for a second that I regretted marrying Petralka. She was so sweet on me, and so... You know what? Let's forget that for now.

The point is, when a noble or a royal got married, a lot of other people had a say in the matter, whether the couple liked it or not. If they still wanted to be together even knowing that—if they loved each other that much—then, in my opinion, they should go ahead and get married. That was what I had done. I certainly wasn't going to criticize anyone else for doing the same thing. But a wedding that both partners knew would be loveless from the start? That was hard to take, even when I wasn't directly involved.

Perhaps exactly because my own marriage had gone almost miraculously well.

If they were going to marry for purely political reasons, they would still have to act like a couple for the benefit of others—they'd have to pretend to

be close while they were out and about, and surely people would expect them to produce children to continue the family line. And that meant...

"You know you'll have to, like, *do it* with her eventually, right?" I said. Wouldn't it be torture to have to do that sort of thing with someone you didn't care for it all? "In fact, don't you think it would be awful *not* to be able to enjoy that stuff, if you're going to spend your whole lives together?"

"I agree with Shinichi-san," Hikaru-san said, for once backing me up. "Minister Cordobal, if I may be so bold...are you prepared to do that sort of thing with her?"

"What sort of thing? What's *it*?" Garius said. Ahh. The magic rings were having a hard time translating the euphemism. We would have to be more concrete, then.

"Something like *this*," Hikaru-san and I both said at the exact same time.

"What?" I blinked and looked at Hikaru-san to find him pointing at me. I, meanwhile, was pointing at him. We each thought the other was an excellent example of the kind of behavior in question.

"I don't want any lip from *you*, Shinichi-san," said Hikaru-san. As usual, Elvia was practically wrapped around him. It would be too generous to say they were "sitting next to each other"; Elvia was sort of melting into Hikaru-san, who had an arm wrapped around her back. I suspected he was petting her tail or something over there.

"Oh, like *you're* one to talk," I shot back. "At least *we* act like we know when there are other people in the room. Minori-san and Brooke have told me, you know. How every day, you two—"

"J-Jeez! This from the guy who swaps wives on a daily basis!"

"What else am I supposed to do?! Otherwise Petralka would get angry that I wasn't treating them equally!"

She'd said that if I was really a proponent of equality and universal love, then I should love them both absolutely without bias. Which was why every time I had stayed at Amutech's villa with Myusel, the next day I would go straight to the castle and spend the night in Petralka's bedchamber... Er, I mean—that's enough on that subject!

"And you don't have any objections to this, Myusel?" Hikaru-san said.

"Wh-Who, me?!" Myusel said, startled to have the conversation turn to her. "I know... I know how much Her Majesty loves Shinichi-sama... So if all of us can be happy...then... Well, I... It's enough for me to be able to be

by Shinichi-sama's side." She sounded embarrassed to say all this out loud. But me, I thought it was deeply admirable! Profoundly commendable! O! My heart burned with moe!

I hardly knew what was happening. I'd always been head over heels in love with Myusel, but somehow it was like my feelings had gotten even bigger and deeper since we'd tied the knot. Whoever said marriage was the graveyard of life was dead wrong. It was the best!

"All right, all right. I've had my fill of sloppiness," Minori-san said, obviously annoyed. I realized I'd been gazing into Myusel's eyes. Shoot! I could probably share a gaze with Myusel until the Maitreya Buddha arrived and never get tired of it!

Minori-san turned toward Garius and said, "But as much as I hate to say it...I agree with them. If marrying a woman is only going to make you suffer, then I don't think you should force yourself. If I can help you get out of it, then I'll gladly break every bone in my body—!"

Man! Love and sex were *really* tricky subjects. If somebody ordered me to get sexy with a guy, I just wouldn't be able to make myself do it. But if Garius married Ilara-san, that was essentially the position he'd be in. I felt really bad for him.

"No, I think...I'll manage somehow," Garius said.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I mean, Garius-san, you're—"

"Well, I wasn't *always* that way," he said placidly.

That shut me up for a second. "Huh? You, uh... You weren't?"

"Indeed." Garius nodded.

Huh! So he hadn't come into the world like... I mean, it wasn't inborn for him. Something had caused it...

"Hang on... Haven't I had this conversation before?" I muttered, and then I remembered. Loek and Romilda's parents. They'd told me that Prince Rubert had been the key to Garius "awakening" to a few things when he was studying in Zwelberich.

I was quiet for a long moment. No, no. I'd better stop thinking about this. It was leading me in some very...*too-real* directions. Especially with Garius's ex-boyfriend sitting right in front of me. (Even if he was just a projection.)

"The way you say that—does that imply you've got some experience with that sort of thing?" Hikaru-san asked.

“What sort of thing?”

“I mean, did you ever fall in love with a girl or anything?”

“I...” Garius almost started talking, but then his eyes met mine and he gave a small shake of his head. “It was a long time ago.”

Well, *that* sounded evasive.

“The point is, that’s not the problem. And I *do* think this could be a good opportunity. This isn’t the first such proposal that I’ve had. Even Petralka has a husband now.” He sighed deeply. “A marriage for me would be to the benefit of the nation. Even Petralka didn’t act based solely on her own feelings.”

His eyes flitted toward Prince Rubert, who bore his gaze silently. The prince had once proposed marriage to Petralka himself—for the benefit of the nation.

“Therefore I should be considering what would be best for the country and for the royal family. Not to mention that, even if Rubert feels I bear him no personal responsibility, I do owe a debt to Zwelberich on account of the matter involving him and Petralka. This would be a fine way to repay it.”

“Garius-san...” Minori-san sounded so...sad, somehow.

.....You know, when had she stopped calling him “Minister Cordobal”? When had it become “Garius-san”? I always called him that, so I’d hardly noticed, but now I wondered...

Garius turned to us and lowered his head respectfully. “I’ve put you all to a great deal of trouble. It wouldn’t sound right to say that I’m giving up, nor would it be respectful to Miss Clef. Perhaps we could say that after considering every possibility, I’ve chosen to respond proactively—to move things forward. I’ll speak to Miss Clef tomorrow.” His tone was clipped; he obviously wasn’t looking for any argument. The message seemed to be: *I’ve made up my mind, and this discussion is over.*

And yet...

“I’ve spent long enough here. It’s time we were getting back to the castle,” he said, and stood up.

After Minister Cordobal and Shinichi-san went back to the castle, Prince Rubert said, understandably, that his work here was done, and he went

home too. Well, maybe that's not quite the right way to put it, since he'd never *left* his home in the first place, being present only as a projection and all.

After that, everything went like it usually did. We had dinner, took our baths, and went to our respective rooms to pass the time until bed. I spent some time chatting in Elvia's room, and had just left to go back to my own bed to sleep when I bumped into Minori-san in the hallway.

"Oh," I said. I guess "bumped into" isn't quite right—more like I caught sight of her. She was gazing out the window into the night sky, distracted. She looked unusually melancholy, and I hesitated to just walk past her.

"Hikaru-kun," she said when she realized I was there. She turned to me with a feeble smile and said, "Going to bed already?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You were in Elvia's room again, weren't you?" Behind her glasses, her big, round eyes shone teasingly.

"Er... Yeah."

"You two visit each other every day."

"I guess that's pretty much what it works out to, yeah."

"Is this what they call a commuter marriage?"

"Come on. It's not the Heian era anymore."

"You might as well just share a room at this point, right?"

"I thought about that..."

But it still felt too soon. To me, at least. They say love and marriage are different things, and being with someone from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to sleep—well, it means revealing a whole lot of yourself to that person. It wasn't like I had a bunch of secrets to keep at this point or anything, but...well, I guess deep down I really was a guy, and I didn't want the girl I liked to see me at my most vulnerable, or let down my guard at the wrong moment and make myself look really stupid.

Elvia probably felt the same way. She acted easygoing and sometimes seemed like she didn't get embarrassed as readily as Myusel or Her Majesty, but she was still a girl. In fact, when we were alone together... Nah. It's not important.

"I thought about that... But maybe not yet," I said. "Besides, we can change our minds anytime."

"You have such spirit. Ah, to be young!"

“What’s that supposed to mean?” We were only talking about whether Elvia and I would, like, cohabit or get married or whatever. What was Minori-san doing talking like some spinster aunt who envied her teenage relatives?

“You’re just so in *love*! Gosh... I hardly know what to do. Everybody looking so happy and everything.” Minori-san smiled and shrugged, and her eyes drifted to the window again. When I’d spotted her, she’d seemed to be looking at something or somewhere far away.

I let my gaze follow hers. The darkness of the Eldant night lay thick upon the world, but I could still see the massive, looming presence of Holy Eldant Castle. Night here was normally so deep that you could hardly see your hand in front of your face, but watch fires burned around the castle every night, making it look as though it alone was untouched by the darkness. That was where Her Majesty the Empress lived. Shinichi-san and Myusel’s new home. And they weren’t the only ones there, of course...

“You’re thinking about Minister Cordobal,” I said.

Minori-san turned to me, a bit taken aback. “Er... Well... Yes, I suppose I am.” She smiled, but it was hard to tell what it meant. Come to think of it, Minori-san had seemed distracted at dinner after Minister Cordobal had left. Like something was really, really bothering her. Now she asked, “What makes you bring him up, anyway?”

“I don’t know... I just thought maybe this would be hard for you to swallow,” I said. I was just saying what I felt. Minori-san smiled again, and this time there was a distinct hint of pain. It looked like I had hit the nail on the head.

“Hikaru-kun... What do *you* think about that marriage?” she asked.

“Me? I guess I think that if Minister Cordobal has decided that’s what he wants to do, well, it’s definitely one way to handle things.”

It was a standard trope in fiction: marriages between nobles were always about position and family prestige more than anything else. From what I heard, it was hardly unusual in this world either. Something like Shinichi-san’s marriage to the empress was the real exception. Close to a miracle.

Then again, their marriage had been as much thanks to Her Majesty’s hard work as anything else. To dismiss it as good luck or a miracle would be disrespectful to the empress. She’d done so much more than simply use her power to grab whatever she wanted by fiat—she’d thought long and

hard about what would really be necessary to get what she desired, and then done it.

"It sounds like it's not as if he can only love a man. And if his partner understands the situation, maybe that's not so bad," I said.

"Yeah, you're right... That's how anyone would think about it, isn't it? Even Prince Rubert accepted it," Minori-san said, as much to herself as to me. I felt really strange. From our perspective, she seemed so adult. She seemed to have an answer for everything. I'd hardly ever seen her looking lost or hesitant.

"But maybe you don't, Minori-san?" I asked.

Somewhat to my surprise, she shook her head. After all, this ex-WAC who liked BL so much and would do anything for BL so passionately that it seemed like it could threaten the entire world—in some ways, Ilara Clef's proposal seemed like it should have been perfect from Minori-san's perspective. Miss Clef was more than open to the idea of Minister Cordobal and Prince Rubert going back to their romantic entanglement...

"I guess it really gets in the way of the fantasies when he's married, huh?" I said.

"No! Even I can differentiate between reality and fantasy that much."

Yeah, sure she could. I hadn't forgotten about the "Seven Days of Rottenness." Hell, I'd practically been traumatized by them.

"If it was all about fantasizing, then what would it matter if he got married or not?" Minori-san said with a bitter smile.

"You think? But then, why...?"

"Why? I just...don't like it," she said.

"Huh?" I sure hadn't expected her to say that. Like I said, for better or for worse, Minori-san was more adult than Shinichi-san and I, and she always seemed to think things through. She was always logical—even if it was BL logic—and hearing her talk about some kind of gut feeling was really unusual.

"I don't really have any romantic experience," Minori-san started. That much, Shinichi-san had mentioned to me—in fact, he'd said Minori-san seemed to have some daddy issues. Like, I guess the reason she joined the JSDF was so that she could use the martial arts her father had taught her and get him to be proud of her at last. Although I was given to understand that he'd since passed away.

It's hardly rare to hear about girls with father complexes or boys with a mommy thing being pretty awkward when it comes to romance. One explanation holds that the para-love that children feel toward the parent of the opposite sex is a sort of practice run for real romantic love—but if you mistake when you need to switch over from the practice love to the real thing, that's when your feelings can get out of hand.

"That's why I adore BL so much, because it's about people who transcend gender to find love," she said. I guess that was what had gotten her so into the genre—though it seemed like it was carrying her in ever stranger directions. "Naturally, sad-romance BL stuff where they have to suppress how they really feel... I mean, that stuff can be great too, but..." She cast her eyes to the ground. "But I hate knowing that the man I love will never be happy. I hate it!"

I caught my breath, and for a second my eyes went very, very wide. I mean, of all the things I had thought Minori-san might say, that wasn't one of them.

"Hikaru-kun?"

"It's not too late, Minori-san," I said, taking a step closer to her. I'd said that if Minister Cordobal had made up his own mind on this, and this was what he wanted, then I had no objection. But that was only assuming nobody *else* had any objections either. Suppose there was someone who had feelings for Minister Cordobal. Someone who was close to both of us.

I was painfully well acquainted with the bitterness of unrequited love. It stung so badly to think your feelings might not lead anywhere. I didn't want any friend or family member of mine to go through the same thing. Especially not this woman who was like an older sister to me, to whom I owed so much.

"Let's stop this wedding," I said. "I think you're the only one who can change Minister Cordobal's mind now."

To undo a decision made, you needed another, even more powerful idea—and Minori-san's feelings fit the bill perfectly. There was no more reason to hesitate.

"Thank you, Hikaru-kun," Minori-san said, and a small smile came over her face.

We both turned and looked at Eldant Castle where it floated in the midst of the darkness. I trusted we could make it in time. But I also knew that

time was in short supply. What could we do? What *should* we do? I was quiet for a long moment. It didn't look like I was going to be getting any sleep tonight.

Garius had summoned Ilara-san to the same audience chamber as yesterday, and just like yesterday, we were sneaking a peek. One difference from the day before was that the double doors didn't stand wide open; instead, we had to peer through a small crack between them. It was a bit like looking through a postbox, but we could at least see Garius, along with Ilara-san facing him, her back to us. I assumed her knights were with her, probably to either side.

"Miss Clef. Regarding your recent proposal of marriage..."

If he got as far as "I humbly accept," this would all be for nothing. So we didn't hesitate for a second, but charged through the doors.

"Wait just a seeecoooond!" I cried.

I'd actually done it! The classic *wait just a seeecoooond* shout!

"Wha?!" Garius and Ilara-san turned to us with looks of shock, and Ilara-san's bodyguards rounded on us. Garius, in particular, was wide-eyed and looking at us, speechless.

One person who wasn't speechless was Ilara-san. "What's going on here? How dare you barge into this room!" She sounded more angry than surprised. Maybe she'd figured something like this might happen. Then again, I guess anyone would be upset to have someone burst in on them like this.

Then she saw Minori-san and glared at her. "You. You're the girl from yesterday."

Ilara-san was a lovely woman, but her gaze could be downright piercing. It was enough to make me go knock-kneed, but Minori-san faced her squarely. She marched over to Garius and Ilara-san, while Hikaru-san and I stayed back by the door so as not to get in her way.

"We oppose this wedding!" she said.

I had to admit, I was surprised. I had never expected Hikaru-san, of all people, to come up with a plan to scotch Garius and Ilara-san's wedding. Especially not because, according to him, it was what Minori-san wanted.

Surprised or not, though, I'd been on board almost immediately. There was certainly no reason for me to argue. In fact, I was personally in favor of everyone being able to marry someone they loved.

Call me a romantic if you must. A wet-behind-the-ears idealist. Laugh it up! But romance has become a huge genre of entertainment in every format—manga and anime and games and light novels—and almost every story has some romance elements. It just goes to show that everybody wants to fall in love. Everybody wants to be happy. It's practically an inborn, universal vision among humans. And exactly because, through almost miraculous good fortune, I myself had been able to realize that vision, I wanted as many people as possible to taste the same joy I had.

That was the logic I'd used to convince Petralka, and of course Minori-san and Hikaru-san didn't need convincing. And now here we were.

"*You* can't make Garius-san happy!" Minori-san said, so forcefully that you could almost see the *bam!* sound effect appear over her head.

That was her opening gambit. Ilara-san, though, didn't look fazed in the least. Instead she narrowed her eyes and scowled. "I can't fathom why you feel you need to say that. What are you to Garius-sama? His lover? No, you're not. So what right do you have to pass judgment upon our union? And anyhow, you can't possibly know whether I can make him happy or—"

"I do know!" Minori-san said, equally unintimidated. "I know because you aren't thinking about *him* at all! Not as he is now!"

"As he is now?" Ilara-san raised a questioning eyebrow, not quite following Minori-san's meaning.

Minori-san took another step forward. "You say you want Garius-san to be happy? That you're ready to do what it takes to make him happy? If you *really* wanted him to be happy, you wouldn't be trying to force him into a marriage he doesn't want!"

"A marriage he doesn't want? He doesn't *know* what he wants! That's why I had to give him a little push, to—"

"I'm not done!" Minori-san said, interrupting Ilara-san, who was starting to sound a little shaken. Minori-san was extremely forceful. Even Ilara-san's knights could only stand there with their swords in their hands. Garius was watching the entire scene dumbfounded.

Minori-san looked straight at him. I could only see her back from where I was standing, not the look on her face or the light in her eyes, but I was

sure that a look of fiery passion was leaping past her glasses, straight to him! I was mentally cheering her on: *This is it! Now's your chance! Tell him how you feel!*

"You think you're the only one with the guts to do this? I want to watch Garius-san be happy too!" Minori-san said.

Wait...what?

"I am Koganuma Minori, known far and wide in the fujoshi world for my [redacted] years of steeping in BL and being rotten as sin, and I'll thank you not to underestimate me!"

"".....Um," I said, turning to Hikaru-san. "Did she just say 'watch' Garius be happy? Not *make* him happy?"

"Yes! I think that's the greatest expression of love Minori-san can offer!" Hikaru-san clenched his fist, which I guess conveyed that all of this was fine and dandy.

"Uh... Explain?" I said.

"Fundamentally speaking, BL isn't about projecting yourself *into* romantic situations, it's about observing them as a bystander. So that expression makes perfect sense from Minori-san's perspective!"

Whaaaaaaaat?!

"Wait, but isn't this the part where she's supposed to tell him how she really feels, and then they kiss?!"

I'd come here with the expectation of witnessing just such a simultaneously joyous and awkward moment! I had my phone's camera on video mode ready to go and everything!

"Wait..." That was when I realized that Ilara-san had gone completely silent, and her bodyguards were standing frozen. I wasn't sure what Minori-san's deeply, karmically rotten outburst had meant to them. Were they angry? Confused? Or were they—I hesitated to believe it—impressed? Okay, maybe not that last one. Whatever. The question right now wasn't whether Minori-san's fujoshi frenzy had been right or wrong. It was what effect it would have on Ilara-san. Or if it would have *any* effect.

So what are you going to do, Miss Ilara Clef?!

We watched with bated breath...

“Minori...” Garius-san spoke my name with such surprise. I was a little embarrassed, sure, but I didn’t flinch as I answered him with a smile. I wanted him to be happy. That was really and truly all there was to it.

The Eldant royal family always seemed oddly guilty about the position they were in—Her Majesty, Petralka, was the same way. I suspected it had to do with the fact that their parents had killed each other fighting over which of their children would get to be the next ruler. Kids whose parents leave them with their hopes and dreams—whose parents pass away before the kids can get out from under the weight of those burdens—often end up postponing their own wishes and desires, more focused on making the people around them happy than themselves. By the time they realize that they have their own aspirations, their own desires to be happy—by the time they figure out that it’s okay to be a little selfish sometimes—it’s often too late.

But Garius-san?

I know you, I thought. *You’re the older brother who talks a good game, but deep down, you just want to see your little sister be happy.*

And she was now. He thought that was enough. But seeing him give up on his own joy? Watching that hurt. It hurt so bad. That was why I did it.

“Koganuma...Minori?”

Another voice spoke my name, quietly. Now it was my turn to be surprised. It was Ilara-san. She was staring at the ground, her fists clenched, her whole body shaking. I guess I’d ticked her off. I couldn’t exactly blame her. From her perspective, I was just a meddler making arbitrary demands, a child following my emotions instead of my logic. She was younger than me—so it probably only made her angrier to hear an older woman spouting kiddie idealism at her, trying to stop her from going through with her plan.

But then...

“Koganuma...Minori?”

This time the whisper came from the two knights flanking Ilara-san, who were trading a look. Uh... Were they that weirded out by my name? Why did even Ilara-san’s bodyguards seem so amazed? I was still trying to process it when Ilara-san abruptly looked up at me, stamped on the floor, and shouted, “Koganuma Minori!!!”

She lunged, her arms wide like a predator ready to attack—and I was her prey. I’m chagrined to admit, the move was so completely unexpected that I

was slow to respond. Too slow—her arms latched around me, and she began squeezing me in a powerful hug..... Hey.

"Wh-What's going on here?!" I cried. What was she doing? Was she trying to suffocate me? But if so...

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Garius-san, Shinichi-kun, and Hikaru-kun watching with their mouths hanging open. Still befuddled, I looked back at Ilara-san, who had buried her face in my chest.

"I've *so* wanted to meet you!" she said and looked at me again, her eyes brimming with emotion. "I've always wanted to see you in person, my...*goddess*!"

(Insert the longest pause you can think of here.)

Uh. Okay. What did that mean?

I was still reeling when I heard Shinichi-kun mutter from behind me, "Oh my God...is this a yuri twist?!"

"*Please* let me have your autograph!" Ilara-san said. Her eyes were shining, with little tears even beading at the corners, as if her most cherished dream was coming true. She clasped her hands in front of her chest like a pure maiden praying to God—and her guards did too.

Whaaaaaat.

I definitely did not understand what was going on, but it looked like she wasn't upset at Minori-san for messing with her would-be marriage. In fact, every thought about the prospective match seemed to have flown clear out of her head. She and her guards had cornered Minori-san, showering her with cries of "It's such an honor to meet you!" and "I can't believe you're here!"

It was obvious that any productive conversation had come to a complete standstill. "So Minori-san is your, uh, goddess, Ilara-san?" I ventured in a bid to get things going again.

"Do you in Ja-pan not use the word 'god' to refer to creators of sublime works?" Ilara-san asked, bubbling.

Ahh. Someone had heard about how we sometimes describe especially awesome illustrators as "god-tier," and in a weird version of the telephone game, it had turned into just straight-up "god." Wait, but then—

“I’m an absolute disciple of your wonderful manga, Minori-sensei!” Ilara-san said.

Come again? Minori-sensei? Manga?

“Uh, Minori-san, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Oh... I’ll bet it’s... *You* know.” She held up a pointer finger and twirled it in the air. “The Shinji and Sarius thing.”

Oh, that. The doujin seemingly modeled on me and Garius...

“Y’know, I’m just the idea person. The scriptwriter. One of my students is doing the art. So it’s not *my* manga, exactly, but my name’s in there...”

Well, this was the first I was hearing about it!

Then again, maybe it was only natural. A manga involving me and Garius? Who could possibly have the audacity to write something like that except Minori-san? Whoever the student was doing the illustrations, they probably assumed that they could get out of any charges of *lèse-majesté* by saying Minori-san asked them to do it.

“So I did the Shin/Sari thing, and then Sari/Shin, and then there were some spin-offs, and before I knew it I had a series on my hands.”

“A... A series?” I said. But when?! When had this happened?!

I was starting to lose it, but Ilara-san said, “I like Shin/Sari and Rig/Sari! And that love triangle in the most recent issue...it was *divine*!” She put her hand to her mouth, her face flushing.

Ugh. No! She was rotten! Rotten to the core!

“I object, Princess. I believe the best *kabe-don* of all was the Sari/Shin one in the last issue,” one of the knights said.

“I think the very start was the greatest and the best,” said the other.

“Now, girls, don’t you understand how Minori-sensei *feels* about this latest issue?!”

And on it went. I guess this meant the knights were fujoshi too. I mean, Amutech was actively exporting otaku works to other countries, including Zwelberich, so it shouldn’t have been surprising that they’d been exposed to them. But to think that they would fall in love with a BL manga by Minori-san and one of our students and become rotten fans themselves...!

“I always hoped to meet you someday, but I never dreamed it would be here. That you and Garius-sama—” Ilara-san spoke rapturously, but then she slapped her hands to her cheeks, the flush quickly giving way to paleness. “No! What have I... What have I said to you, Minori-sensei?!”

Well, we had sort of come looking for a fight. Anyway, people from this world probably wouldn't have any idea if the name "Koganuma Minori" belonged to a guy or a girl, so why would Ilara-san suspect that the woman she was arguing with about Garius was also the author of her favorite BL manga?

Ilara-san and her knights started to tremble so hard you could almost hear it. "L-Listen, I..." Ilara-san started, but Minori-san, of course, wasn't angry; instead she looked at them with genuine compassion.

"Please, don't. I'm the interloper here. Please, don't worry about it."

"Minori-sensei!" they wailed.

"I feel the same way you do—thrilled to meet compatriots of mine. Let's have a nice, long talk together!"

"Oh, Minori-senseiiii!"

Minori-san took Ilara-san's hand. Ilara-san looked at her, the flush in her face getting ever higher, while her bodyguards wiped away tears. What was going on here? What was I seeing? It felt like I was witnessing the birth of a religion...wait. None of this was what we were *actually* here to deal with.

"So, then...about the wedding with Garius-san," Minori-san said. Phew! At least she remembered. I'd been worried they would completely drop the subject of Garius and go into a marathon twenty-four-hour BL conference or something, and *then* how would we have stopped them? Minori-san went on, "If you love Garius-san and he loves you, no one will object to your marriage. But..."

She stopped there and looked at Garius. He replied with a half nod and said softly, "Miss Clef." Then, more audibly: "I'm afraid...I simply can't accept your proposal on this occasion." Firm, unequivocal.

"But... But..." Ilara-san looked sincerely dismayed. Her eyes went from Garius to Minori-san and back; she looked like a frightened kitten.

"Is that really what you want, Ilara-san? A match that's nothing but a political exchange? I know you said Garius-san could do what he wanted after you were married, but he..."

If he married Ilara-san, he would go back and forth between Eldant and Zwelberich more often than before, which certainly might reignite his closeness with Prince Rubert...

"But that's...what I wanted," Ilara-san said, looking disconsolately at the ground.

“What?”

“If Garius-sama came to Zwelberich more often, then he and my dear Rubert might...”

Wait. Hang on a second. Don’t tell me that all along—

“This was a sham marriage to help Garius-san and Prince Rubert?!” I whispered, louder than I’d meant to.

Ilara-san nodded, abashed. Garius was completely silent; it looked like it had never occurred to him that this might be Ilara-san’s true goal, any more than it had to us. It was rare to see him looking quite so befuddled.

“A-After all, my dear Rubert... His feelings for Garius-sama haven’t...”

Yeah, well, okay, but was *that* a reason to—I mean, marriage is a big deal for a woman, I think. Was she that eager to get them together, even if she had to give herself up to do it?! Did Rubert know about this, or had she had the idea on her own, as a fujoshi? Argh! This wasn’t making any sense!

“Ilara-san,” Minori-san said. There was a soft *pompf* as she placed a hand on the other woman’s shoulder. Ilara-san lifted her eyes from the floor and looked at her, beseeching. Minori-san said, “Were you really thinking about *them* when you came up with this idea?”

“But of course I was!”

“Why would you resort to asking Garius-san to marry you, then?”

“What?”

“If you really want him to be with the person he cares about most, then asking him to marry someone else is by definition taking them further away from love, isn’t it? If you married him, he would be yours, even if it was only outwardly.”

“Perhaps, but...but Rubert tried to do the same thing!” She must have meant the time Prince Rubert had tried to marry Petralka. I shouldn’t have been surprised if everything that was happening now was somehow connected to what had happened then.

“But that was his own choice. This time, it wouldn’t be,” Hikaru-san said.

“You think, Hikaru-san?”

“Well, it’s the difference between active and passive, right?” He looked confused. Apparently even he was starting to have trouble following Minori-san’s logic.

“If Garius-san marries you, Ilara-san, then that rules out the possibility

of him marrying anyone else. And I don't think Garius-san is the kind to betray his spouse, even if she swears it's all right," said Minori-san.

Ilara-san was silent. As for me, I found Minori-san's speech very moving. I thought she was right. Sure, Ilara-san could say it was all right to fool around after they got married, even practically order Garius to commit adultery. But some people would find that idea repugnant even if their spouse gave them the okay. I was amazed how far Minori-san had thought this through. And all for Garius!

"Besides, we're just mobs."

Uh?

"In the world of BL, we're mob characters. We can't go trying to manipulate their relationships! Marrying someone to set them up with someone else? A mob would never presume!"

Uhhh? This conversation suddenly seemed to be taking a very strange turn.

"Our role is to stand by, ready to be their friends and allies at any time. To watch over them with joy and compassion as they live out their destinies —that's what matters!"

I thought I could see a heart-shaped wave crashing behind her. It was probably my imagination, though. Ilara-san and the others didn't seem to see anything.

Ilara-san looked at Minori-san in complete earnest. "Minori-sensei! I... I was wrong!" She shook her head, deeply moved. Meanwhile, her knights were down on one knee beside her, mumbling "A most reverent teaching..." or something.

"Uh... Hello?" I said. What had happened to the moment we were all having? The women had gotten too rotten to respond. It was like me and Hikaru-san and even Garius didn't exist to them anymore.

"We shall follow you all of our lives, Minori-sensei!" declared Ilara-san, clinging to Minori-san. Beside her, her knights were weeping openly, like believers who'd seen a bona fide miracle.

"BL is truly fearsome," I mumbled. It reminded me afresh of the true terror of cultural invasion, and I shivered as I stood there.

And so, with that, talk of Garius and Ilara-san's wedding stopped, as if it had never happened. Ilara-san had only been planning to stay until today anyway, and although she was sad to go, she left for Zwelberich without arguing. When I say she was sad, of course, I mean sad to leave her so-called "god of BL," a.k.a. Minori-san.

"I promise to send you letters! I look forward to your next work, Minori-sensei!" She and her knights were in tears as they left Eldant Castle.

Garius was going with them as far as the border. Ilara-san had officially come to see him, after all, even if she had ended up completely ignoring him. It was polite of him to see her off. That left me at the castle. I was seeing Hikaru-san and Minori-san to a bird-drawn carriage waiting outside that would take them back to Amutech's villa.

"I've gotta say, Minori-san, I had no idea," I said. "I mean that you, like, *liked* Garius or whatever."

They traded BL books all the time. Spending that long talking with a fellow enthusiast about your shared interest—it shouldn't have been surprising if something had started to blossom there. "So now you're pretty much just waiting for his answer, right?" I said.

"Think the ceremony will be as big as Shinichi-san's? Minister Cordobal is next in line for the throne, after all. Quite a catch, you sly devil!" Hikaru-san added.

Hoping to see Minori-san a little embarrassed, we showered her with congratulations, but she only looked at us blankly. "Answer? Ceremony?" After a few seconds, she seemed to catch on. "Ohh, I get it. *That's* what you meant?" She started laughing.

"Huh?" Hikaru-san and I looked at each other. What was that about? Had we said something funny?

"It's not like that at all, you two," Minori-san said. After a good guffaw, she waved her hands as if waving the very idea away. "I don't 'like' him like that. He's my *oshi*!"

"Uh?"

"Oshi? You mean..."

"Jeez. How long have you thought I was—? I mean, I could understand that from Shinichi-kun, but *you*, Hikaru-kun?"

"What do you mean? That we had it all wrong? Why else would you want to stop his marriage?" Hikaru-san said, openly stunned. I didn't blame

him—I didn't understand either.

But Minori-san said, "You're right, I do love Garius-san. He's one of the few people around here who shares my interests, and I stan him so hard. Don't you want your *oshi* to be happy?"

Oshi... That was, like, a word to describe your favorite character, the one you grooved on the most. So, uh, the love Minori-san felt for Garius wasn't romantic—she was thinking of him like a character in a story, and she didn't want him taking a marriage route that didn't fit with her image of him. Was that all there was to this?!

Okay, wait, hang on a second! *That* was why Minori-san had driven off Ilara-san? For a second I thought maybe she was just making a joke to hide her embarrassment, but I saw the way her eyes sparkled—I knew she was telling the truth. As if to drive the point home, she clasped her hands in front of her chest and said, "I'll always hold the possibility of you and Garius-san in my heart, Shinichi-kun!"

"Don't hold that!" I cried.

"It'll inspire me to do my best work for my next issue!"

"You don't have to *do* another issue!"

"But you live in the castle together! Who knows what might happen between you two?!"

"*I* know! I know nothing is going to happen! I'm too busy being all lovey-dovey with Petralka when I'm at the castle!"

I'd hoped that Minori-san—Minori-san who faithfully looked after even otaku like us, Minori-san who was like a beloved older sister—could be happy. I'd wanted her to get together with someone she loved. And yet it turned out the whole time, she...

"I don't know if this is awfully profound...or just profoundly awful," Hikaru-san said with a sigh.

I had no energy left to do anything but laugh. In fact, I was perversely impressed. I didn't know if I could feel that strongly about anything that didn't involve love, or offer any reward—something where I was just a bystander. Once again, I could only admit that BL was a thing of amazing power.

"If that's what you want, Minori-san...then I guess that's what counts," I said.

She was gazing into the distance, already dreaming about a "new issue"

that Hikaru-san and I wanted no part of. We could only look at her and sigh.

Even with our connection to Japan severed, our school carried on. There was no supply of fresh otaku works, but our redoubtable students, whom we'd plied with otaku culture and tended like young otaku shoots, continued to discuss and analyze the things we already had available, as well as create secondary works, not to mention manga and light novels homegrown in the Eldant Empire. Our duty was to help those young aficionados mature as best they could, to inherit the future that awaited them—and be a helping hand to reach out if they ever needed it.

You could say our "school" had become almost like a real, well, school. We taught language. Math. Science and social studies and lots more besides. Rich works came from a rich education—or at least a wide-ranging one. Creators didn't have to care about what would be "useful"; they just learned about whatever interested them, then used that to tackle the next thing. Then those creators created new art, which in turn produced new crops of readers, viewers, and players. It was a process we had faith in.

So it was that I found myself at school for another day. Morning classes were over, and I was headed to the faculty room for lunch break. Myusel would be there, having come from the castle with a packed bento box. I couldn't wait! Officially, she'd been released from her job as my maid when we'd gotten married, but she still liked to fix meals for me when she had a chance. The other day she'd even made me a "character bento," where the food was arranged to look like a character from a show.

"Oh, Hikaru-san," I said when I spotted him in the hallway. He was there to handle afternoon classes. Perfect—I wanted to talk to him about something. "You hear already?"

"About what?"

"The engagement! Garius-san and Minori-san."

"....*Huh?*"

Ah, the sweet sound of surprise. I'd been just as shocked when Petralka told me the night before.

"What, like, for real?" Hikaru-san said.

"Yeah. Sounds like Petralka wasn't expecting it either. Minori-san

happened to be at the castle, so I asked her. She said, and I quote, 'It's so Garius-san never has to entertain another wedding proposal that he doesn't want—a little ruse.'"

"There's...something wrong here."

"Look, I don't make the news. But still!"

It had been several days since Ilara-san had gone home, and I found myself thinking from time to time, wondering how Garius really felt about the fact that Minori-san had broken up the potential match between him and Ilara-san. Since Garius, evidently, didn't *only* love men, maybe it was possible that his feelings for Minori-san had become something more than just friendship with someone who "shared his interests."

In an intriguing twist, apparently it was Garius who had suggested this match.

"Where is Minori-san, anyway?" Hikaru-san asked.

"Off today. No classes to teach," I said. I'd come from the castle because I needed to be here, but Minori-san had stayed behind. Something about having lots to discuss with Garius about the announcement of their engagement.

"And here I thought Minori-san said mobs shouldn't aspire to marry their oshi," Hikaru-san said.

"Garius-san was the one who proposed, so maybe it doesn't count? Anyway, it's not a *real* marriage. Minori-san swore up and down that it was just an act. A disguise." Hikaru-san didn't say anything to that, and after a long moment I found myself musing: "But...I wonder if it's really just for show?"

"Search me. You heard it straight from the horse's mouth and *you* don't know, Shinichi-san. How am I supposed to guess?" He smiled faintly. "But sham or not, I think it's a good thing."

"R-Really? But..."

"What's with the look?"

I realized belatedly that I'd drawn my lips into an expression of serious thought, not to say skepticism. Oops. I hadn't meant to— I mean— "I'm just thinking...and I know it's really late to be realizing this... But just when I thought the, you know, flags were pointing one way...she just..."

Argh. I could hardly get the words out. This was someone who'd been with us from the very beginning, watching over us like a protective older

sister. If she really did love Garius, then I wanted to see that love blossom. I wanted to be as encouraging as I could, to help if I was able. It was just...

"I guess it's kinda like...y'know...stealing?" Even I knew it sounded like childish jealousy, a dumb little brother throwing a temper tantrum when he found out his beloved older sister was getting married.

"Oh... Yeah, I could see it." Hikaru-san nodded. "I mean, this whole time you've been convinced that *you* were the one Minister Cordobal wanted."

"*No!* Not even!"

What would ever give him that idea?! I didn't feel that way and wouldn't and hadn't—and I would say it as many times as I needed to! Okay, so I did think Garius had looked good made up as a woman, but that was only because he'd looked like Petralka. It wasn't like my pulse was racing for Garius personally or anything! I mean it!

"It's all right, Shinichi-san. You don't have to fight it."

"Why must everyone take things in the most unsavory direction?!" I wailed.

Just then, I heard a *thump* of something hitting the ground behind me. I turned around to see...

"Myusel?" She'd dropped the bento box she'd made with love—*made with love*, what words! what power!—on the floor. She wasn't cleaning it up, though, just looking at me. Her shoulders were shaking and she looked very upset. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Shinichi-sama... So you and Minister Cordobal... It's *true*..."

"Wait, Myusel! I don't know what you're talking about!"

"The other day! I knew you'd fallen in love with Minister Cordobal..."

"That is *so* not what happened!"

When had I fallen in love with Garius?! Wait—was she thinking of when we'd done his makeup? Seriously, Garius wasn't the reason I'd been blushing!

"Have... Have I been...in your way all this time, Shinichi-sama?"

"Why would you even think that?!" I exclaimed, but Myusel's imagination was off and running, and then so was she, dashing away with tears flying from her eyes. She'd always had an inordinately low opinion of herself, and today that impulse had chosen a particularly bad time to manifest itself.

My lunch... My lunch made with love...

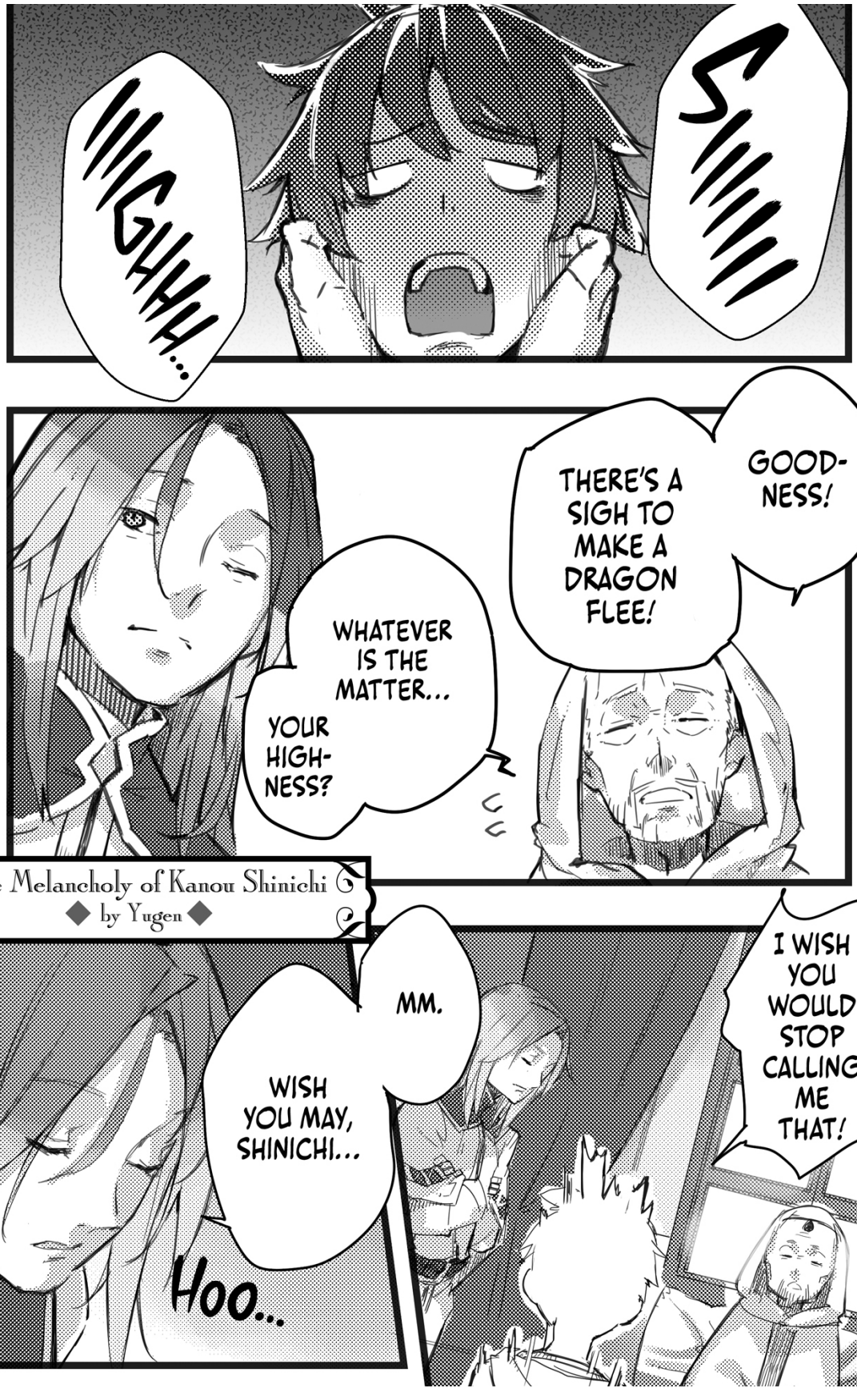
“Bad boy, Shinichi-san. Making your poor wife cry, and you still newlyweds? You always did go in for the devilish games.” Hikaru-san was grinning, clearly enjoying this.

“Who’s devilish? I’m askin’ ya!” I shot back, falling into Kansai-ben without quite meaning to. Then I went racing after Myusel. “Myusel, wait, please! This is all a misunderstanding! I swear it’s not what it looks liiiike!” My shouts echoed down the school hallway.

.....So there you have it. Everyone was used to the commotion; it was really just another panel in the gag strip of our lives. Sure, there was lots of work to do and plenty of things to think about, and I can’t say we didn’t have our concerns for the future. But the Holy Eldant Empire was pretty much peaceful, and we were pretty much happy.

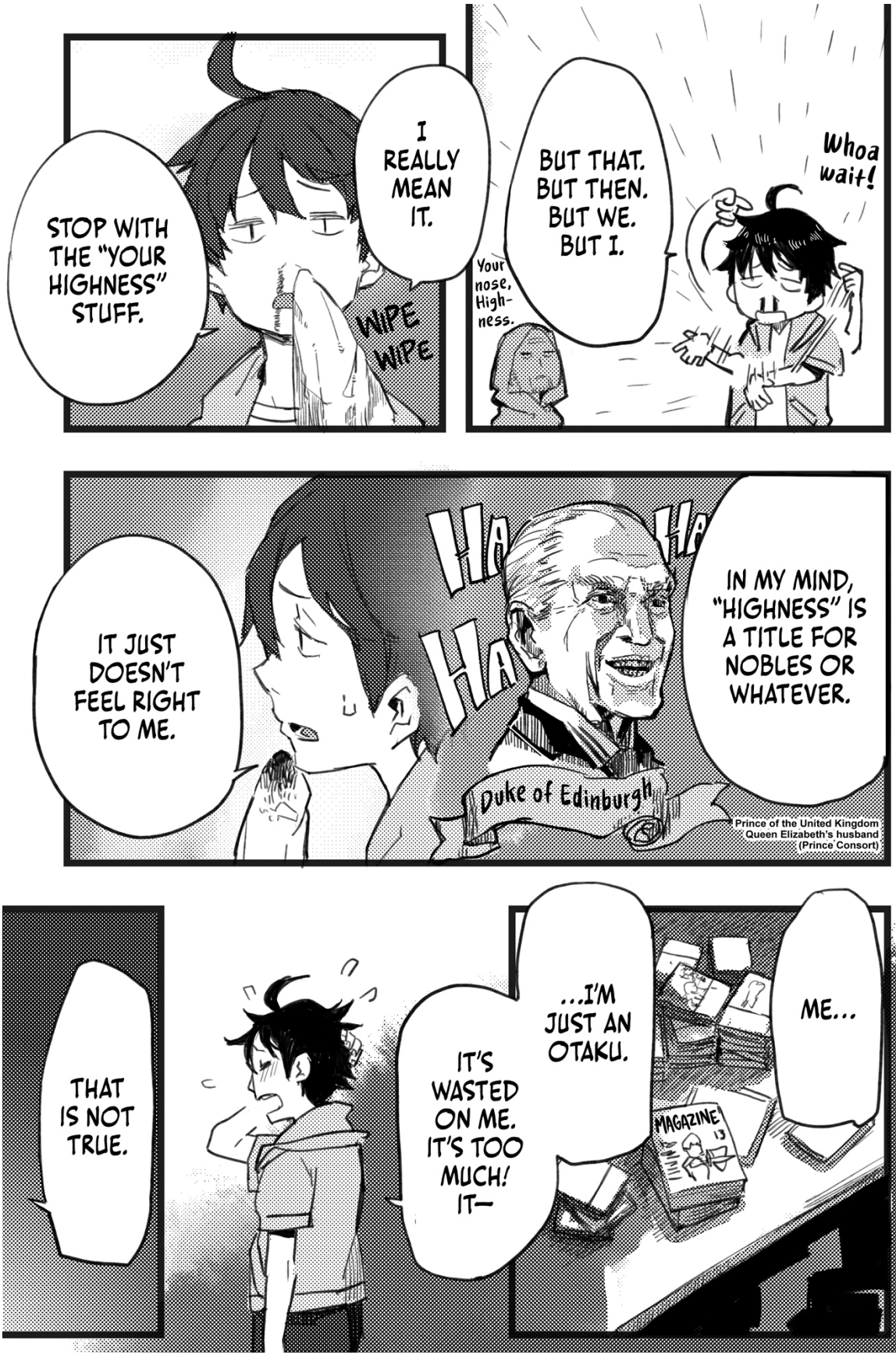
□□□□□□

(*Cont’d?*)


SHIIII
IIIGHHH...
GOOD-NESS!
THERE'S A SIGH TO MAKE A DRAGON FLEE!
WHATEVER IS THE MATTER... YOUR HIGH-NESS?
The Melancholy of Kanou Shinichi
by Yugen
I WISH YOU WOULD STOP CALLING ME THAT!
MM.
WISH YOU MAY, SHINICHI...
Hoo...

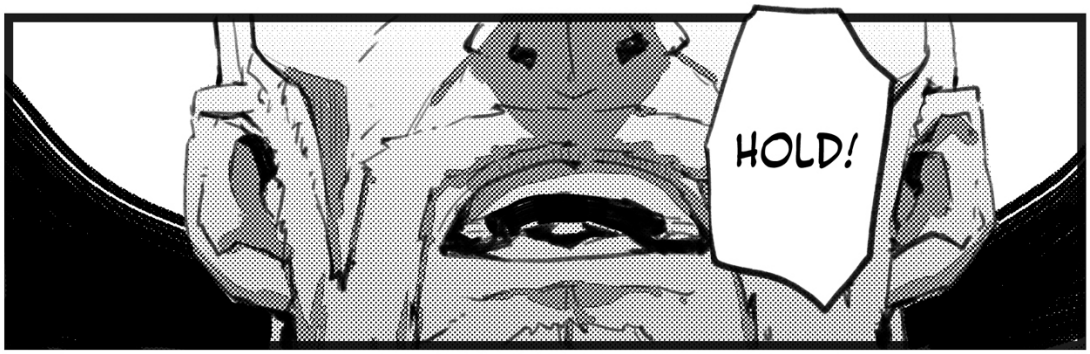
HE'S RIGHT!
SPOUSE OF THE RULER OF THE ENTIRE ELDANT EMPIRE.
...BUT YOU ARE NOW PETRALKA'S HUSBAND.
TO HEAR HER SERVANTS' WORDS OF JOY!
TO SEE HER MAJESTY'S FACE!
I'M ONLY SORRY I WASN'T THERE TO HEAR THIS JOYOUS NEWS IN PERSON.
OOF
I LOOK FOR-WARD TO...
AH!
TRULY!

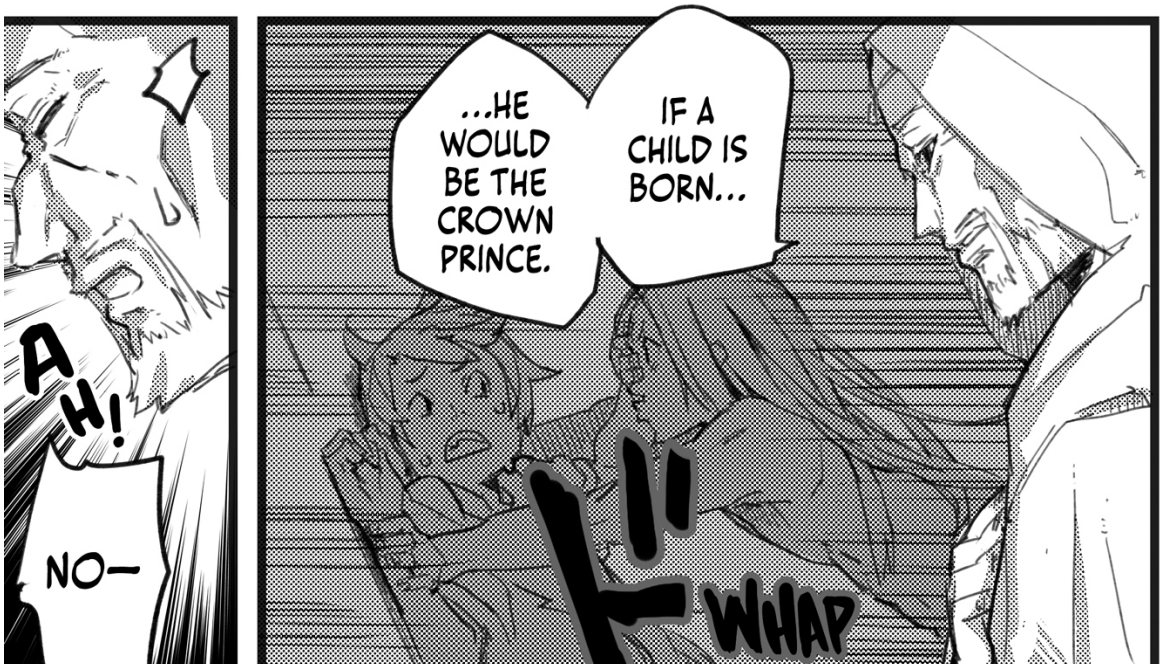
SUCCES-
SORS
...SUC-
CESSORS.
GRIN
BLRRRT
アーッ


STOP WITH THE "YOUR HIGHNESS" STUFF.
I REALLY MEAN IT.
WIPE WIPE
BUT THAT. BUT THEN. BUT WE. BUT I.
Your nose, High-ness.
Whoa wait!
IT JUST DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT TO ME.
HA HA HA
Duke of Edinburgh
IN MY MIND, "HIGHNESS" IS A TITLE FOR NOBLES OR WHATEVER.
Prince of the United Kingdom
Queen Elizabeth's husband
(Prince Consort)
THAT IS NOT TRUE.
IT'S WASTED ON ME. IT'S TOO MUCH! IT—
...I'M JUST AN OTAKU.
ME...
MAGAZINE

YOU MUST NOT DISPARAGE YOURSELF...
...AS JUST AN OTAKU.
SHINICHI!
THANKS TO YOU, THE ELDANT EMPIRE HAS A FUTURE.
I COULD ONLY ENTRUST PETRALKA TO ONE I HAVE SUCH FAITH IN AS YOU!
STRIP
Heh!
ドォォォォン!
?!

DON'T BLUSH LIKE THAT!
WHY ARE YOU NAKED?!
YOU ONLY NEED TO GET USED TO BEING A NOBLE!
ドゥ
DOOM
ドゥ
DOOM
TURN
ドゥ
DOOM


HOLD!


AH!
NO—
...HE WOULD BE THE CROWN PRINCE.
IF A CHILD IS BORN...
ドゥ
WHAP

YOUR HIGH-NESS!
AH, I CAN'T WAIT!
IT COULD BE A PRINCESS!
GLOOOOW
THUDOM
THUDOM
THUDOM
THUDOM
I WILL DO WHAT I MUST.
HEEEEK!
GLANCE
YES, I SEE YOU HAVE MUCH TO LEARN.
SO BE IT.
EEEYAAAGGHH!
SIIP
WHAT SHALL WE NAME THEM?
La la la! I can't hear you!

Afterword

Hullo! Sakaki here, with *Outbreak Company* for the first time in quite a while. I've got to say, I'm a little embarrassed. I declared this series done! Finished! Over! But here I am with a *gaiden* volume (hah). In Japanese, we have a word for this: *dasoku*. It means "like legs on a snake," and describes something completely, utterly, totally unnecessary. God, I'm so embarrassed.

A few different things led to the creation of this book.

During an autograph session, a reader said that they wanted to know what happened to the characters from *Outbreak Company*. My visual director, Yuugen-san, was with me and heard the request, which inspired them to say to me, "Hey, maybe we should do a doujin about it." I said that I thought that sounded nice. I knew Yuugen-san was a very busy person, though, so in my mind it was a passing comment. A pie-in-the-sky thing. Might be fun, but hey, it's nice to want things.

Fast forward several days. Fumisato Araki—my assistant and the woman behind Minori, provider of both tireless support and endless nuggets of fujoshi wisdom—was discussing something totally separate with me when she said, "In the afterword, you wrote something about Minori having a fake wedding with Garius and going to live with him. When I saw that, it really fired my creative impulse. Think I could run with that in a doujin?"

(You might be interested to know that she recently made her debut with B'sLOG Bunko with the novel *Gekkaki: Hiiro no Itansha to Shujuu Keiyaku* [The Moonflower Devil: A Contract to Serve the Scarlet Heretic]. Wait, does that mean we basically have a near-BL novel direct from Minori?!)

On top of all that, I was seeing comments on Twitter from people who wanted an epilogue: what had happened to Shinichi, Myusel, Petralka, and all the rest after the story was over? They wanted to know.

It was a complete coincidence that all these things happened at once, but once they had, I started to think: *Could this really work?* Doujinshi are a lot

easier to get into than they used to be, but they're still harder to find and purchase than ordinary novels, so I decided the book would reach more people if I could convince Kodansha to release it as a proper *gaiden* volume. I bounced the idea off my esteemed editor, and almost immediately got the okay.

The result is the book you're holding in your hands. Some story, huh?

This isn't the first time I've written about things that happened after the main story was over, but—how do I put this? After more than a year away, it felt strange to come back and once again write Shinichi, Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Hikaru-san, Minori, and Garius. I was actually in a bit of a slump. I found myself thinking, *Has my talent as a writer dried up? Did I ever even* have *any talent?* I honestly wondered whether I would actually be able to write these characters again. When I finally made myself sit down and do it, though, I found I had a completed rough draft hardly ten days later. It was sort of like writer's rehab—I'd almost go so far as to say that Shinichi and his friends saved me.

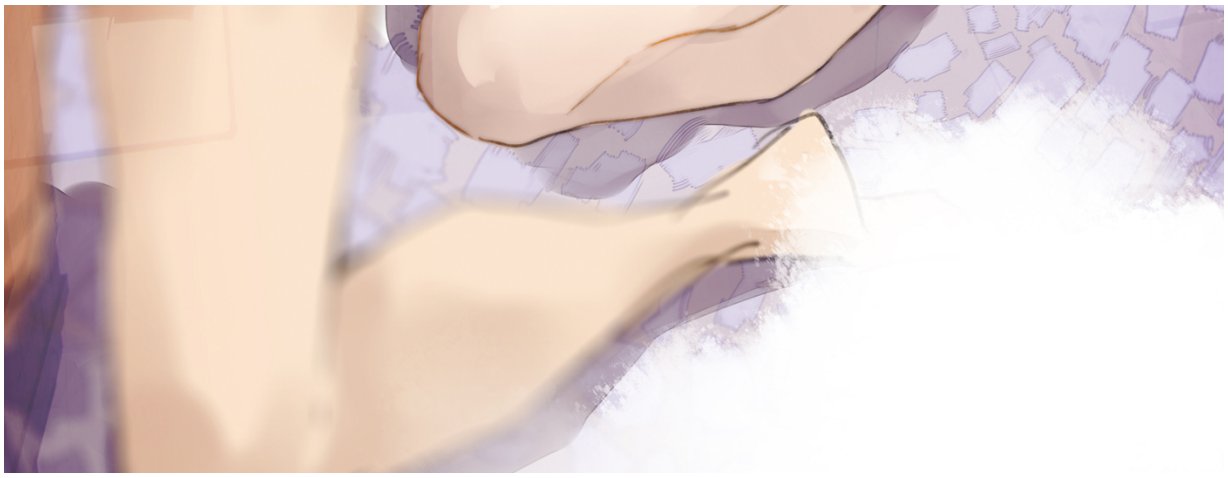
In any event, I was able to come back and do a new *Outbreak* book thanks to Yuugen-san, my readers, and my editor. I'd like to take this opportunity to offer them my profound gratitude. If you enjoyed this book, then I'm happy!

Ichiro Sakaki
19 Jun 2018

P.S. I've got a couple of new books coming from Kodansha. One of them is *Yome-Yome Immigration*, a story that originally had nothing to do with *Outbreak Company*, but which by special request from my editor (and after I realized Yuugen-san was illustrating this series too) turned into a story where Shinichi and Myusel make regular appearances. Is it a spin-off? Have I got a star system going? Who knows?!

The story is intended to stand on its own, but if my *Outbreak* readers would like to get a taste of what Shinichi and his friends are like in a different world, I encourage them to check it out.

BUT THEN...
I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO PERFORM MY DUTY...
Y-YOUR DUTY?



WHAT? I MEAN...
WHAT?
THAT'S IT!
LET US HOLD A MATRIMONIAL CEREMONY!
RIGHT NOW!
MUTTER...
MUTTER...

Bonus Translator's Notes

Chapter One: Marrying Her Majesty

Communication

In the source text for the line translated as "communication is the essence of good business," Shinichi alludes to *hourensou*, a common expression in Japanese business settings. The word *hourensou* means "spinach," but in this case it's a mnemonic that combines the first characters of *houkoku*, *renraku*, and *soudan* (report, communicate, and consult/confer —that last one meaning to ask for advice or get others' opinions), which are said to be the fundamentals of a smoothly running work environment.

"My Own Father Never Hit Me"

This is the quintessential *Gundam* reference. The line is spoken by Amuro Ray in the original series when his commanding officer slaps him for refusing to obey orders. The phrase has become a long-standing part of Japanese pop culture, its influence so great that, for example, you can even hear it in an early scene of Satoshi Kon's *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003).

Unit Bath

Although expressed in Japanese using katakana-fied English (*yunitto basu*), this term is Japanese in origin. (So-called *wasei eigo*, or "made-in-Japan English," is perfectly common in the language.) Common in condos and apartments, a unit bath is a single room containing a bathtub or shower, a sink, and a toilet. This could be considered notable simply because in Japan, these three things have traditionally been separate, rather than being located in one room.

Mimorin

This is the nickname of voice actress Mimori Suzuko (in fact, in the text here, "Mimorin" is a gloss given on her actual name). Among other things, she's played parts in *Love Live*, *Pretty Cure*...and *Outbreak Company*, where she was the voice of Myusel.

Furoshiki

A furoshiki is a traditional Japanese cloth for wrapping and carrying

things. In principle, you could put almost anything in a furoshiki (if the cloth were large enough), but in anime and manga it's most often encountered as the way to carry *o-bentou*! The "vine pattern" is called *karakusa moyou* in Japanese, and refers to the pattern of crawling, circling vine-like lines that adorns pretty much every furoshiki in anime and many real ones as well.

"I Wanna Talk to the Manager!"

A famous line spoken by an irate customer in the manga *Oishinbo*, which is about a restaurant.

A Pretty Good RC-Car Drag Race

Shinichi literally says there's room for a *mini-yonku* race. *Mini-yonku*, meaning "mini-4WD [four-wheel drive]," is a brand of Tamiya RC car, so called because they are four wheel drive vehicles—if very small ones.

Rasputin or Dokyo

Two names that Shinichi invoked in Volume 2. To review: Dokyo, who lived through much of the eighth century, was a Buddhist monk who became a favored member of Empress Shotoku's court following her accession in the 760s. Grigori Rasputin, a Russian mystic, became close to the family of Tsar Nicholas II around the time of World War I and gained what some saw as undue influence with the royals. Dokyo was ultimately exiled after the death of his empress, and Rasputin was killed (several times, according to some legends), so Shinichi is wise to take caution from these precedents. The reference to "fake eunuchs" may refer to the likes of Lao Ai, a court official in China in the third century BC who supposedly claimed to be a eunuch to gain access to the court, but was in fact whole.

My Head Would Be on a Pike

Shinichi says he would be subject to *uchi-kubi jigoku*, or "the hell of beheading," a punishment in Edo-era Japan in which the victim was beheaded and the head was then put on a stake outside the castle.

ATM-09-ST, ATM-09-RSC...

These are all designations of mechs that appeared in *Armored Trooper*

VOTOMS. (*Big Battle* was a capstone OVA to the series from 1986.)

L-O-V-E from the Bottom of My Heart!

Shinichi says *zokkon LOVE*, with *zokkon* meaning "from the bottom of one's heart." Given that this passage consists of a string of references to pop songs, the likely allusion here seems to be to a 1983 song of the same name by the 1980s boy band Shibugakitai. The group Riot Baby released a song by the same name in 2021, but that would put it after this book's 2018 publication.

Trembling, Pulsating Love!

In Japanese, *furueru ai*. This is the title of a 2011 song by Park Yong Ha.

A True Love Warrior

The series of song-title references culminates with a particularly complicated gag. Shinichi describes himself as an *ai-senshi*, here meaning "love warrior" (□□□). However, the reference is to a song that appears at an important moment in the second *Mobile Suit Gundam* compilation film; the song and the movie are both called □□□, or *Soldiers of Sorrow*—which also happens to be read as *ai-senshi*.

I've Loved You for Twelve Thousand Years

A reference to the opening theme from the *Genesis of Aquarion* OVA. (The reference continues through the next several lines.)

I Can't *Stop* Loving You

Shinichi might be out of songs, but he's not out of references. The Japanese expression here, *aisazu ni irarenai*, could be an allusion to a drama series that ran on Nippon TV on Wednesday nights in 1991. Then again, and giving the lie to his protestation about being out of music, it could be a reference to the Japanese title of Ray Charles's song "I Can't Stop Lovin' You."

But I Refuse

This entire section, including the illustration, is a protracted parody of a meme-famous scene featuring Rohan Kishibe from *JoJo's Bizarre*

Adventure.

Lucky Sukebe

That is, getting an eyeful, copping a feel, or otherwise getting perverted (*sukebe*) pleasure purely through fortunate circumstances. The expression "lucky sukebe" can describe either a person or a situation.

Sco*ter

A scouter, a device from the *Dragon Ball* franchise. It allows the user to see someone's fighting ability displayed as a number. No record of it working on levels of affection, though.

All Two of My Wives

The Japanese uses the pseudo-English coinage *furu-conpu*, from "full complete," meaning a complete set. The joke seems to be that this is probably a term an otaku would use to refer to getting a full set of cards or figures or the like.

I Swear On My Grandfather's Name

Jicchan no na ni kakete ("[I swear] on my grandfather's name") is a line commonly spoken by the main character of the *Kindaichi Case Files* (*Kindaichi Shonen no Jikenbo*) series. The character is supposedly the grandson of Kindaichi Kousuke, a very famous though entirely fictional detective. Kousuke was himself the star of a series of popular detective novels penned by Yokomizo Seishi starting in the 1940s.

Chapter Two: Beauty and the Beast Girl

A Vampire...a Murderer...a Humanoid Decisive Weapon

The expression *hitogata kessen heiki* (humanoid decisive weapon) is sometimes used to describe the Evangelions. The reference to a vampire is probably a *Hellsing* thing; Alucard often appears in the manner described here. We confess we're not sure who the "murderer" (*satsujinki*, bloodthirsty killer) in question is, though. Somebody take away our otaku cards.

Guts Pose

A common "cheering" pose in manga and anime, with one arm folded close to the body and sometimes the other extended in triumph.

Chapter Three: Her Name Is Koganuma Minori

The title of this chapter, *Sono Na wa Koganuma Minori*, is a general enough expression that it's hard to be absolutely certain what it might be a reference to. However, the second episode of *Gundam SEED* (2002) was titled *Sono Na wa Gandamu* (Its Name Is Gundam), so that's one possibility. Meanwhile, an early episode of *Code Geass* (2006) had the title *Sono Na wa Zero* (His Name is Zero), and given the other *Geass* references we've seen throughout *Outbreak Company*, this could very well be the intended allusion.

Thrice-Refined Japanese Sugar

That is, *wasanbon*, a traditional Japanese sugar that's refined three times during the process of its creation (natch).

My Dear

Myusel suggests she could refer to Shinichi as *anata*. Although *anata* is often taught to beginning language learners as the basic second-person pronoun, it has also traditionally been the pronoun with which wives address their husbands, hence the translation "my dear." (If you're curious, one of the most common modes of second-person address in Japanese is actually to use the listener's name, as in: "*Tanaka-san wa doko e ikimasu ka?*" ["Where are you going, Tanaka-san?"])

The Law of Cycles

Enkan no kotowari, a concept from *Madoka Magica*. (The reference runs all the way through these lines.)

A Pretty Fulfilling Life

Minori concludes that they were feeling *mankitsu*, fulfilled. However, in the Japanese, she initially expresses this as □□, then corrects herself to □□. The second is the ordinary, appropriate form of the word; the first one sounds the same but is an abbreviation for *manga kissa* (manga café). We've bent translation—and sometimes the English language—about as far as it will go throughout *Outbreak Company*, but we ultimately decided this

line was simply going to be lost in translation. Or not. Maybe the real joke is that you had to come to the translator's notes to find this one.

Why Would I Sound So Intense About It

Literally, "Why would my first-person pronoun change?!" Shinichi says this because in Minori's suggestion, she says he would call Garius *ore no mono*.

***Kabe-don* Wall Slam**

A classic move in which a character corners someone—usually an object of romantic interest—by getting their back to a wall (*kabe*) and then planting a hand firmly against said wall to prevent the person's escape (*don!*, a "bam!" or "slam!" sound).

There's No Way My Wife Could Be This Cute

A reference to the light novel series *Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai* (aka *Oreimo*), the title of which means "There's No Way My Little Sister Could Be This Cute."

Hieros Lokhos

The Greek name of the so-called Sacred Band of Thebes. This unit of elite Thebans consisted of 300 people—150 pairs of male lovers—the idea being that they would fight harder for each other.

Whatcha Done Shown Me

In Japanese, *nanchuu mon wo misete kureta n ya*. This appears to be a play on the line "*Nanchuu mon wo kuwasete kureta n ya*" (What's this thing ya done fed me?), spoken by the character Kyogoku Mantaro in *Oishinbo*.

Pale With Moe

Shinichi says Minori was *moe-tsukite ita*, which sounds like the common verb *moe-tsukiru* (□□□□□), meaning "to be burned out," "burned down," or "burned to a crisp." Here, however, the first part of the compound uses the verb □□□ (*moeru*, to get moe).

My Wifey-Wife

The Japanese is *o-yome-tan*, consisting of the word "bride" (*o-yome*) and the diminutive suffix *-tan*. (*-tan*, possibly a form of *-chan*, can be used with the object of moe feelings, but not usually with real people; here it's hyperbolically silly and playful.)

The Maitreya Buddha

Called Miroku in Japanese (a name that might ring a bell with fans of *Inuyasha*), Maitreya is the "future Buddha," a Buddha who will manifest at the end of time to reinstate the dharma (Buddhist teaching) for good.

Commuter Marriage

In Japanese, the expression is *kayoi-kon* (from *kayou*, a verb meaning "to commute" or "to transit to," and *kekkon*, "marriage"). It refers to a situation in which the partners in a marriage live separately and travel to see one another, for example on the weekends. The remark that "it's not the Heian era anymore" alludes to the fact that the practice of *kayoi-kon* goes at least as far back as that period in history, circa the 11th century. In those times, men and women commonly lived apart when married. It was almost exclusively the man who went to visit his wife—that is, women couldn't take the initiative to visit their husbands—to the extent that the arrangement was sometimes called *tsumadoi-kon*, or a "visiting-the-wife marriage."

The Classic *Wait Just a Seeecoooond* Shout

In Japanese, *chotto mattaaa!* This comes from a Japanese comedy show called *Neruton Beni-kujira-dan*.

A Heart-Shaped Wave

He literally says, "I thought I could see the spray crash behind her, like *zapaaan!*" This is a reference to a song that parodies Hokusai's famous "Great Wave" painting; in it, the wave is "in love with the mountain (i.e., Fuji)," and the small boat that can be seen in the painting turns out to be full of people cheering the wave on and giving it advice about how to attract the mountain. The sequence was part of NHK's "Visu-Tune" series, shorts that introduced works of art using attention-getting music and animation.

The Melancholy of Kanou Shinichi

The title of the manga vignette is a clear reference to *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (*Suzumiya Haruhi no Yuutsu*).

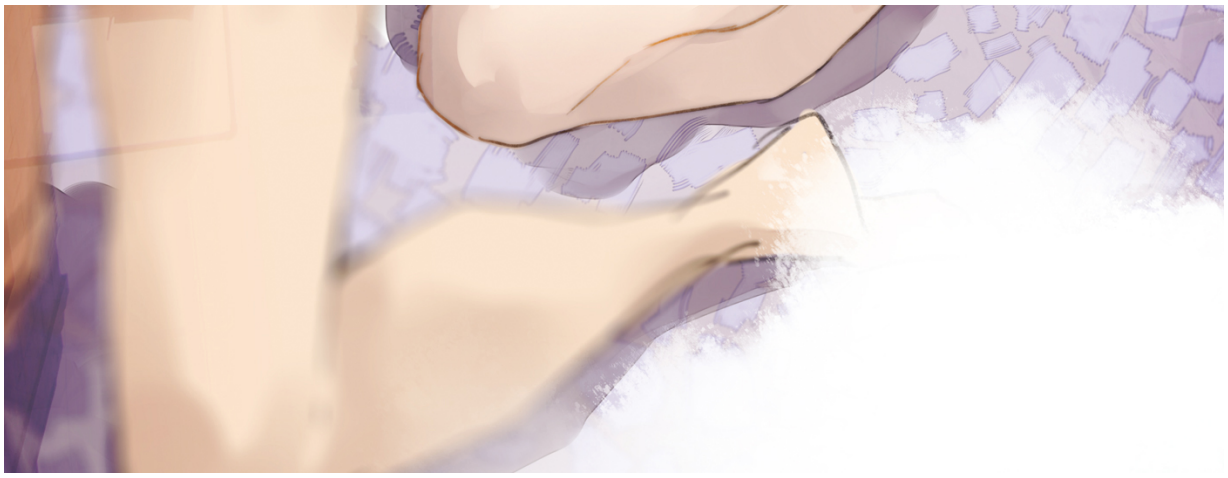
SUCCESSORS

Yotsugi is the Japanese word translated as "successors." The romaji appears as part of the art/background in the original.

Afterword

Star System

The "star system" was a concept pioneered by Osamu Tezuka. His manga frequently featured recurring characters who could be seen not just within a single series, but across a variety of series, much the way you might see one "star" actor in many different movies. Like actors, the characters didn't behave exactly the same way or have the same roles each time, but they gave readers a sense of continuity and helped Tezuka cut down on design work for side characters.



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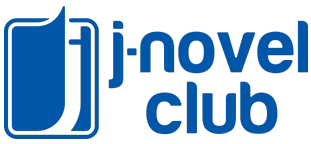

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Outbreak Company: Gaiden
by Ichiro Sakaki

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